

The Cotton Spies

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»The Cotton Spies«**



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Author's Note

**What the First World War Means
to me**

The events in this book are fictitious though inspired by actual events. The characters are fictitious and any similarity to real persons, living or dead is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.



In March 1918 the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk removes Russia from WW1 but not the German and Turkish invaders searching for Russia's natural resources. Russia is in civil war chaos. Britain must stop its enemies acquiring cotton, used in ordinance, but can do so only by sending intelligence missions into Russian Turkestan to gain the support of politicians, even of opposing parties.

Author's Introduction

to the Historical Background of »The Cotton Spies«

Characters

Every character in the book is fictional including characters inspired by major historical figures like the Prime Minister of Britain. Any resemblance to actual persons is purely coincidental.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

In March 1918, Russia signed the Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with the Central Powers and dropped out of the war. This act left Russia's former Allies to contend with the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Ottoman Turkey, and Bulgaria): militarily on the Western and other fronts; economically.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk: allowed the Bolsheviks to concentrate on maintaining their power in government as the Russian Civil War began; gave Germany the opportunity to buy cotton, oil and food from the, desperate for money, Bolsheviks. The Allies who often thought that the Bolshevik Government were German agents still hoped however that Russia could be persuaded to re-join the war despite signing this treaty.

Over the spring and summer of 1918 the Central Powers ignored the terms of Brest-Litovsk and invaded Russia in search of its metals, food, oil and cotton and to take them rather than buy them.

Britain and France

Two nations were given the task of trying to prevent the Central Powers from gaining access to Russia's natural resources.

France's role was to try to stop German access to wheat and other foods found in the Ukraine, Bessarabia and the Crimea.

Britain's role was further east and its' tasks were: to prevent cotton from Russian Turkistan being acquired by Germany; stopping Ottoman Turkey and Germany conquering the countries of the Caucasus where oil and metals were found; ensuring that the freed Central Powers' Prisoners of War (POWs) did not become a potential invasion army bound for India.

NB: The Freed POWs, e.g. the Czechs, switched sides to join the Allies, other POWs joined the Bolsheviks or the Counter-revolutionary "Whites," and would switch sides if and when necessary.

Natural Resources

Cotton was a major natural resource of which the Central Powers were desperately short during the Great War. Cotton was used in explosives (as gun cotton) and the major suppliers were the USA and Russia. In 1913 the British Board Of Trade estimated, in 1913, that Germany imported circa 310,000 tons of cotton or of which about 300,000 tons was used in armaments; in 1916 it was estimated Germany acquired 50,000 tons of cotton from the USA. 1917 saw America enter the war on the Allied side so that cotton source disappeared. The lack of cotton forced Germany to use the less effective and efficient alternative, wood pulp. In the summer of 1918 neutral Russia had cotton, lying unsold in Russian Turkestan, and needed to sell it and Germany needed to buy it.

Oil was of interest to both Ottoman Turkey and Germany because of its uses and as a trading resource. With Russia in disarray there was a chance of one of the above seizing control of the centre of the Caucasian oil fields—Baku. The two countries were so competitive in getting to Baku that in August 1918 troops from each country fired on each other.

The Ottoman Empire and its Allies

The Caucasus is one of the places where Christianity meets Islam. The small Christian countries in the area, Georgia and Armenia, sought protection from Germany and Austria-Hungary respectively, against the Turkish threats of

invasion. In 1918 as Russia was falling into Civil War with revolutionaries fighting counter-revolutionaries, Moslem tribes in Central Asia fought either or both the above, as they sought to free themselves from the Russian Christian Empire.

The Ottoman Turks it would seem were prepared to lose parts of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East (Mesopotamia, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon) and concentrate instead on acquiring a Pan-Turkic Empire. This Empire would start on the eastern shores of the Caspian traverse Russian Turkestan to the Chinese border, or even into Chinese Sinkiang (Chinese Turkestan).

Protecting British India

India was still Britain's "Jewel in the Crown." On different occasions prior to 1918 both Germany and Ottoman Turkey had sought to foment insurrection via jihad in India but had failed. Now Indian revolutionaries had a new route into India—from Russia as the latter's Bolshevik Government supported anti-imperialism and world revolution.

The British Management of the War in the Middle East and Central Asia

The war in the Middle East and Mesopotamia was run by different military departments. The Palestine Front was run by the War Office in London. The Mesopotamian Front was initially run by the Government of India's Military Department from Delhi/Simla with little input from the War Office in London. NB: The War Office in London did become more involved in Mesopotamia (and in the Caucuses) in 1918.

Politically too, different departments had dissimilar responsibilities in Central Asia and the Middle East. In Persia for example the British Ambassador in Teheran was appointed by the Foreign Office but the political officers who exercised consular duties in Southern Persian towns were appointed by the Government of India's Political Department. In the Arabia Peninsular the Foreign Office supported Hussein of the Hejaz (titular head of the Arab Revolt) and the Government of India supported Ibn Saud.

Because of these different departmental responsibilities and viewpoints co-ordination of the war by Britain was difficult. A shortage of information, men and money for use in Central Asia and the Caucuses further restricted what action Britain could take.

My Approach to Place Names

The book's events take place in London, India, Russian Turkistan, Chinese Turkistan, Persia/Iran, and Trans-Caspia. I have used a mixture of the old and new names for some countries and towns.

Modern names used e.g. Azerbaijan (formerly a collection of khanates) and Turkey (formerly the Ottoman Empire); Old names used e.g. Persia (Iran) and Krasnovodsk (Türkmenbaşy).

Parts of the Government of India moved from Delhi to Simla only in the summer but I always use Simla to avoid confusion.

Chapter 1

Persia March 1918

'They are going to murder you Major Edrich.'

Edrich stared at Mousafi, the governor of the Persian town and district of Shushtar and said nothing. He made a square using the forefinger and thumbs of both his hands and squinted at Mousafi. He frowned and then looked down into his lap—something was wrong. Then he saw it. The right ear was far too low. He erased some lines and then with deft strokes drew new ones. He looked at the portrait. Yes, that was better. Then he noticed that the nose was too angular. Edrich began to change the nose and then realised that Mousafi had spoken to him and by the look of him he expected an answer. Edrich tried to remember what had been said but he had been concentrating on the portrait too hard.

'I think this is my best work to date, Excellency. You have been most generous in allowing me to draw you today when I know you are so busy.' He beamed at Mousafi but he was sorry that he had ever mentioned the fact that he was an artist on his arrival in Shushtar six weeks ago. He had started drawing the governor at their second meeting and now the portrait was nearly completed but all Edrich could see were things that needed changing; he could appreciate why a little known Dutch painter, he could not think of the name, had cut off his ear. The governor continued to stare at him in a most odd way. 'I am sorry, you said something about something?'

'Murder, Major Edrich!'

Edrich nodded. 'Ah yes. I was so engrossed in getting your ears right that I did not hear whom you said was murdered.'

'There is nothing wrong with my ears, major.'

'No of course not, it is my drawing of your ears that is wrong,' Edrich quickly replied not wanting to upset the governor.

'What I said was not who was murdered, but who will be. And I am afraid it is you, Major Edrich.'

Edrich sat up straight. 'Me? Are you sure, Your Excellency? I am a murder target?'

'I am afraid so,' sighed Mousafi.

Edrich nodded mechanically at this statement and his face, which had at first flushed, then gone sallow, before beginning to return to its normal colour. As if by magic his right shoulder, which had taken a German bullet in France began to ache whilst his left shoulder that had once been filled with Ottoman Turk shrapnel at Gallipoli gave him a jolt of pain. Thank God he was in Persia. The accuracy of the local tribesmen's shooting was known to be so dreadful that it was accepted that one was in more danger catching a stray shot than a deliberately aimed one. He suddenly had a ridiculous thought: he was assuming that they would shoot him but perhaps they would try and kill him by shellfire after all that's how most people were being killed on the Western Front. No! Firing an artillery piece would be beyond the wit of the locals, particularly now they were without the Germans to help them. That left the knife and they'd be good at knife work because they had to be good at something, whoever they were.

Edrich was calm when he spoke. 'Do you know who they are? Will you be taking action to prevent them?' Edrich remembered the instructions given by Percy Cox, the Head of the Government of India's Political Service in Mesopotamia and Persia. 'Do not tell Persians what to do. Make suggestions only on what they should do. We must give the impression that the Persians run their own country and not us.'

In 1907 Russia and Great Britain had secretly divided Persia into two zones of influence, Russia's zone being the north and Britain's the south. Both countries kept military forces in their zones to control banditry and subdue any opposition to their presence. The Persian Government had since 1907 oscillated between being run by, nationalists who wanted all foreigners out of their country or, politicians who were happy to have Persia dominated by Russia and Britain from whom they received bribes. In the southern zone were situated the Persian oilfields that were virtually owned by a British company. Britain divided its management of Persian affairs between the Foreign Office who controlled officials, like the Ambassador in Tehran and the Government of India who controlled lower level consular officials like Edrich.

The Government of India was involved in Persia because she was constantly worried that a threat to her rule in India, like the Indian Mutiny of 1857, could erupt and that Britain might lose India 'the jewel in her crown'. One of ways the Government of India protected itself was through its Political Department. A major role of this department was the gathering of intelligence, particularly military intelligence. It collected this intelligence from parts of India not directly under its control, like the princely states or the tribal areas along the Northwest frontier. The department also collected information from those countries whose tribes bordered, and were ethnically the same as those found in India, like the Pathans of Afghanistan and the Baluchis of Persia.

Edrich had originally joined the Indian Army but after five years he had transferred to the Indian Political Department in 1905 but kept his military rank. He served in various parts of India and its adjoining territories till the outbreak of war in 1914 where he just chanced to be on leave in England. Expecting it to be, "all over by Christmas," he rejoined his original regiment and

fought on the Western Front and at Gallipoli for the next three years. It was only when Edrich was recovering from his second wound that the British and Indian governments realised that officers like him who had valuable experience and knowledge of places like India were more valuable alive than dead. Therefore rather than being sent back to the charnel house known as the "Western Front" Edrich was returned to duties in India in late 1917. After an initial sojourn on the Indian and Afghan border he had been posted to Persia in January 1918.

He suggested, 'would you allow me to help you?'

'Yes, I have told the Gendarmerie to begin an investigation. If and when they identify who these murderers are, arrests will be made.' Mousafi smacked a fist against an open palm before sitting back and saying more calmly, 'You are welcome to make your own enquiries, Major Edrich. However I insist that you inform me if you do perchance find them before my gendarmes.'

'Thank you. Naturally I will keep you informed.'

Mousafi knew that Edrich had access to a more reliable intelligence service and military force than himself. Edrich knew the Shushtar Gendarmerie were under trained and a rarely paid rabble. Edrich also knew that Mousafi collected the district taxes and that most of them went into his own pocket rather than spending them on local services like the Gendarmerie. Mousafi stirring himself to do something about Edrich's murder would definitely go against the habits of a lifetime.

'I do not think it would be a fitting end for a soldier to end up lying in a ditch with his throat cut,' said Mousafi.

'They would be brave men to murder me that way.' Edrich saw Mousafi looking bewildered so he added, 'the murderers have to get up close to do that.'

Mousafi gave a shudder. 'Major Edrich I was being rhetorical about your being knifed. Your murder would be sad for someone who has fought and survived as a soldier against both the Germans and the Turks.' Mousafi became grave, 'your murder would also be a blot on my career.'

'I certainly don't want to be a blot on your career or, at least my murder anyway,' Edrich said lightly.

Mousafi looked pleased by the remark. Then with his chin on his fingers he said in a stage whisper, 'your assassins are from the Lur tribe.'

'Why do the Lurs want to murder me?'

'Blood feud,' Mousafi snapped.

Edrich blinked, 'blood feud?'

'Do you not have blood feuds in England?'

'Not for many years,' said Edrich. 'I have seen them in India up on the Northwest frontier.' He shook his head, 'such a waste of time let alone life.'

The governor lounged back in his chair and flicked at a fly. 'In Persia there are only feuds like this with our nomadic peoples like the Lurs. We true Persians, like you English, are a sophisticated people and we do not have them.'

Edrich could agree with that comparison of Persians to the nomads but he did not like the cheeky comparison of the Persians to the English. 'What I do not understand is why I am part of a blood feud? I have not: killed anyone; maimed anyone; stolen property belonging to a Lur or anyone else.'

The governor shifted in his chair and thought for a moment before replying. 'As you probably know there was trouble here last year between us British supporters and those like the Lurs, who see you as an unwelcome and an interfering nation. In addition the Lurs are the traditional enemies of the Central Persian Government, whom I represent. Last November the Lurs, led and bribed by German agents, tried to seize control of Shushtar. The Lurs murdered my chief advisor and I only escaped with my life because I was not here!' The governor shuddered at the thought before adding, 'the Lurs and their supporters then attacked the British Mission containing your predecessor. Luckily the tribesmen had neglected to cut the telephone or telegraph lines into Shushtar. One of the members of my staff telephoned the local British military commander based in Dizful and he sent an Indian cavalry column immediately whilst the Mission defied the Lurs' attacks.'

'They got here, in only twelve hours,' Edrich exclaimed recalling a report his predecessor had left for him.

Mousafi nodded in agreement. 'Yes, the rebels were absolutely amazed at the soldiers' arrival. Your wonderful soldiers routed the insurgents within a few minutes and arrested twelve of the Lurs. Unfortunately none of those arrested included any of the murderers of my advisor.' Mousafi paused, 'your predecessor, Major Curtis, a very nice man and an excellent officer, decided to hang three of the Lurs and imprison the other nine. Major Curtis used an expression as to why he had to hang the three men. I really liked it.' He looked at Edrich for help.

'For the sake of example?'

'Yes,' Mousafi looked pleased, 'that was it. Well of course the Lurs swore vengeance against the British for hanging their three men. You have replaced Major Curtis and so you have inherited the feud. The Lurs have been away with their flocks on their winter pastures for the last three or four months but now they are on the move to their summer grazing ground and pass Shushtar on their journey. Perhaps the danger will only last a short time.'

'That is comforting,' said Edrich.

Mousafi's shrugged before he began to whine, 'I get no help from Tehran because it is six hundred miles away. My police have not received pay for two months. I am but an oasis in a sea of Arabs and tribesmen.' Mousafi looked as if he was about to start crying.

Edrich knew that any tears shed would be crocodile ones, he guessed one reason the governor did not want to get too involved because the Germans might win the war and take control of Persia. If that happened Mousafi would still want to be governor for the money if nothing else. Doing nothing in the current situation would help him with the Germans. Edrich also knew that Tehran was between four and five hundred not six hundred miles away from Shushtar but that was just another exaggeration that helped the governor's indolence.

'I appreciate your difficulties but if you can ensure that your police conspicuously patrol round the British Residence I am sure their presence will help deter the Lurs.'

Mousafi looked doubtful for a moment before he looked officious and said, 'of course, major.' He smiled graciously, 'how is the drawing coming along? Can I see it?'

Edrich stood and held the drawing under his chin. 'What does his Excellency think?'

Mousafi looked at the drawing from his seat then rose and came over to where Edrich was standing for a better look. He took the drawing out of the latter's hands and walked over to a mirror. He looked back and forth between the drawing and the mirror several times. Then still studying the picture he walked back to where Edrich was standing and handed it back. 'My ears are not so round as you have me there. However, I must say it is rather good. Your style is typically European but I like it. How many more sittings?'

Edrich grimaced, 'the problem is in the detail so I am not sure.'

'Well let us hope you get a chance to finish it.' Mousafi realised the implications of what he had just said so he added forcefully, 'have no fear—between us we will not allow you to be killed.'

The change of subject from murder back to the drawing by Mousafi was a clear indication to Edrich that the former had decided that their meeting was at an end. Edrich began to gather his drawing materials and official documents and stuff them together into a battered satchel before standing up.

'Thank you, Your Excellency.'

'Thank you, Major Edrich, it has been a pleasure talking to you,' said Mousafi bowing.

Edrich saluted Mousafi and then sweeping up his case he turned and strode out of the room without a backward glance. As Edrich went through the next room at a steady clip his Indian clerk, Pandit Roy, quickly excused himself from talking to a group of Persians and joined him. Edrich put the satchel in Roy's outstretched hand without appearing to look to see if the hand was indeed there. The pair went out into the walled courtyard Edrich deep in thought kept his eyes fixed firmly on the ground. Roy scuttled along taking three steps to every two of Edrich's desperately wanting to say something but realising that the time was inopportune. The pair climbed into the consul's waiting buggy, Edrich's bodyguard of two Indian Sepoys took up their positions and only then did the vehicle move slowly out of the courtyard.

'Your discussions went well with his Excellency, Major Edrich?' Roy spoke warily sensing Edrich's mood was not as happy as when they had arrived.

'Oh yes it went well,' said Edrich. 'My drawing is awful, Roy. I really cannot show it to Mousafi again. You must spill tea on it so that it is ruined.'

'I am sure, sahib, that that would be a terrible waste. You are a fine artist.'

'Thank you, Roy, I do appreciate your comments but perhaps you are too loyal for your own good. If you don't watch out I'll give the drawing to you,' said Edrich.

'Where would I put it? Anyway, I would prefer sahib a drawing of someone who is thin?'

'Why?'

'I will only ever be able to afford a small house on my pension when I return to India. A drawing of a fat man would take up too much space.'

'Well back to spilling tea on it, Roy,' said Edrich laughing.

As soon as Edrich reached the Residency he ordered Havildar Singh to his office. Havildar (the Indian equivalent rank of sergeant) Singh was the senior of the twenty India soldiers who made up the Residency's garrison.

'Havildar, information has come to my attention that there are three Lur tribesmen who are threatening murder because of a blood feud. Whilst I am their primary target I think all here are targets.' He knew that the Shushtar locals disliked Indians even more than the British because so many of the Indians were traders and were often seen by the Persians as rogues. 'I think we could be dealing with the same situation as last November. You were not here then Havildar so perhaps Roy can describe what happened.'

'I assume we will get no help from the police in this matter?' the Havildar said when Roy had finished telling him of the Lur attack and its aftermath.

Edrich smiled, 'I don't think we will and if we do we shall all be surprised won't we, but we must act as if they are helping us.'

The men then discussed what they should do to ensure Edrich's safety and the protection of the Residency. It was decided that Edrich should not restrict his excursions from the building too much but that he should increase his bodyguard to four soldiers and that he should always ride in the buggy or horseback rather than walk even short distances. Havildar Singh was instructed to: review the Consulate's physical defences, even though they were strengthened after the November attack; arrange the extra duties that the increase in Edrich's bodyguard would bring.

'This threat is almost certainly the work of Baqir Khan, Major Edrich,' said Roy once the Havildar Singh had left. 'Major Curtis was pretty sure he was behind the murders here in November but we could never prove it. Perhaps we should go find and arrest him?'

Edrich shook his head, 'Roy, we must be circumspect otherwise Germany's friends in Tehran will have a great propaganda tool and create merry hell for us. Anyway we don't know for sure it's Baqir, we need proof. Remember softly, softly.'

'Catchee monkey,' interrupted Roy in a diabolical attempt at a posh English accent and a stage whisper. Both men burst into laughter.

'I am due to see Mr Ali Ravgani, the Commissioner of Police, tomorrow afternoon. Let us see what we can find out before I visit him.'

'Is it really worth asking him to do anything? Some of the people who have been banned by us before last year's incident have been seen in the town on several different occasions but Mr Ravgani never manages either to find them or arrest them so he must be in the pockets of the brigands or the Germans.'

'I don't think so. The problem is I'm afraid that the men under his command were, until their acceptance as policemen, the riff raff of the town. As for Mr Ravgani himself.'

'Absolutely useless!' interjected Roy.

Edrich thought about his choice of words. 'It is true he has not a clue on how to run a police force because he has had no training for such a position. Nepotism got him the job. I will concede though that he does not appear to have a brain in his head.'

‘Nor anywhere else, Major Edrich,’ interrupted Roy with a grin. ‘Why not call in extra troops from Dizful, now?’

‘I’ll only do that if the Lurs come into town in large numbers. One thing we must not do, Roy, is to panic because that is contagious. It would be very bad for our prestige if we were to be seen cowering from the potential threat of a bunch of bandits who cannot shoot for toffee.’

‘You are playing a dangerous game, Major Edrich.’

‘I’m not so sure. Don’t forget that we have ten more soldiers than were here in November. These Lurs know how quickly our troops can travel from Dizful.’

‘What about the Germans, could they be behind this?’

‘Our capture of Krueger, Neufeld and Wasserstein last year has stopped the Germans directly meddling in Persian affairs. Of course the Germans, no doubt, still send propaganda to their supporters in Tehran who then pass it on to towns like Shushtar.’ Edrich paused and he looked at Roy quizzically, ‘see if you can find out whether anybody has been hearing things from Tehran?’

‘You mean what people are saying in the Shushtar inns and coffee shops?’

‘Yes, and what news the caravans are bringing into town.’

Roy was just leaving when he stopped. ‘The major has not forgotten that Sarder Sabahi and Houshang Azari our friendly and not so friendly local newspapermen are coming to see you tomorrow morning.’

‘No, I hadn’t forgotten, that is why I want to see Ravgani in the afternoon—they might tell us something useful. I am not due to leave the Residency again today and I think it unlikely that the Residence will be attacked just yet. So I am going to work out what else I have to do to protect us all.’ Edrich had learned from his experience fighting on the Indian frontier that acting quickly and decisively must be balanced by thought.

Chapter 2

The War Office London

‘General Rixon, sorry to disturb you, can I come in for a minute?’ General McColl, the Director of Military Intelligence (DMI), said standing at the office door of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) of the British army.

‘Yes, George, come in and sit down,’ replied his boss. ‘No doubt it is something serious—the German attack?’

‘No, sir, no change since this morning—we are holding on. No, it’s the current Persian and Russian situations.’

Rixon scowled, ‘that damn treaty at Brest-Litovsk which our so-called allies, the Russians, have signed with the enemy—appalling—still we have to soldier on, no pun intended. And?’

Britain and its remaining allies had been struggling to achieve a coherent approach to Russia since the Bolshevik revolution in November 1917. Soon after the Bolsheviks seized power Russia had signed a truce with the Central

Powers (Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Ottoman Turkey) and this truce was turned into a permanent peace by their signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918. The Allies felt Russia had betrayed them by signing this treaty unilaterally because it broke an agreement the Allies had concluded in 1914. Following the armistice and treaty first class soldiers were transferred by Germany from the Eastern to the Western Front leaving about half a million Central Powers soldiers still in Russia. Since the Bolsheviks had assumed power the Allies main aim was to get Russia back into the war on their side in the belief that Germany would then have to move first class troops back to the Eastern Front.

Rixon looked at the clock on the wall, 'I have a meeting with the Prime Minister shortly so perhaps we can discuss just one thing now and the other afterwards? Let me finish this,' he indicated a note on his desk.

As McColl sat and watched Rixon resume writing he reflected on Britain's involvement with Persia. When war had broken out in 1914 Russia's army in North Persia began a see saw series of battles against the Turks. Initially these battles occurred in Persia but a series of Russian successes had resulted in recent battles being fought in Turkey. After seizing power in 1917 the Bolshevik Government ordered all Russian troops to return to Russia and to cease fighting. A Tsarist General, Baratov, who had commanded the Russian troops fighting the Turks, had agreed with the British that he would ignore the Bolshevik's instructions and would fight the Turks with volunteers from his old Imperial Command. British sources reported that Baratov's army was small, less than a fifth of the size of his original Imperial command, and whilst it was currently holding a Turkish attempt to advance eastwards towards the Caucasus and Persia it would be unable to do so for long.

Britain in southern Persia since 1914 had not had to contend with a Turkish army but with German and Turkish agents. These agents had some early successes in raising Persian tribesmen to revolt against British control. By the beginning of 1917 British troops and their Persian levies had captured or killed all the foreign agents and pacified the tribesmen and achieved peace.

Meanwhile Germany was taking advantage of the Bolshevik unilateral order to stop fighting by invading Russian territory. This invasion moved both east and south through Russia and could take the Germans first to the Black Sea, then the Caucasus and then Persia and finally India. Likewise a Turkish army was also moving east towards the Caucasus, the Caspian and Persia. If a Turkish or German invasion of Persia occurred it would almost certainly lead to either country seizing Persia's oil fields.

Now that the Royal Navy used oil rather than coal the loss of control of Persian oil to Britain would be serious. To prevent that possibility occurring, the Foreign Office adopted a recommendation from Marling, the British ambassador to Persia. The proposal was that British troops occupy North Persia and concessions must be made to the Persian nationalists enabling them to manage their own affairs in their own interests not Britain's. Britain had to make concessions to stop the nationalists looking to Germany and possibly their traditional enemy, Turkey, for support.

The War Office opposed the Foreign Office's proposal for one reason—the lack of soldiers. The crisis that Britain faced in all the theatres of war was the shortage of replacements for the huge casualties suffered by her armies in 1917. The War Office knew that Britain did not have enough soldiers to create a new North Persian army nor, did it want to fight in a minor 'side show' but concentrate all its resources on the Western Front. The War Office however, did recognise that any potential invasion of North Persia from a Turkish or German army would outflank the British Indian Army fighting the Turks in neighbouring Mesopotamia.

The War Office therefore made its own proposal at the end of 1917 for the creation of a force of about twelve hundred men to perform a specific role. The force was to be called Muncerforce, after its commander General Muncerville, and was made up of soldiers whose backgrounds were in soldier training, intelligence gathering, communications and organisation not in fighting. It was to go first to Northwest Persia and then the Caucasus if its government agreed. Muncerforce's role was to raise and train Persian and Caucasian levies. All interested government departments accepted the creation of Muncerforce as the best solution given Britain's current circumstances. It was also accepted that Muncerforce's direct management was to be by the War Office rather than by the Indian Army. Muncerville was a serving officer of the Indian Army not the British Army.

The Persian levies were intended to replace the departed Russians, thus protecting Britain's Mesopotamian army's flank. The levies would be seen to be defending their homeland with minimum British involvement and that the British government hoped would placate Persian nationalist fears. The Caspian Sea port of Enzeli was selected, as Muncerforce's initial base in Persia because it was an ideal place to control North Persia and a jumping off point for entry to the Caucasus. When and if Muncerforce entered the Caucasus its intended destination was Tiflis, in Georgia and its intention was to train levies to oppose the invading Turks or Germans. Crucial to the War Office's scheme to stop any Turkish advance in the Caucasus was Armenia. The Christian Armenians had been massacred many times by the Turks, most recently in 1915, and they were expected to fight in order to avoid more of the same. Tiflis was chosen as Muncerforce's final destination because if the Turks or Germans could be stopped there then neither would get their hands on the oil resources found further east, around the town of Baku in Azerbaijan. Many Armenians lived in Baku but the vast majority of Azerbaijan's population were Moslem of various tribes of whom the Azeris were the largest.

Rixon holding out a document to him interrupted McColl's thoughts. 'George, I am sorry this had just arrived.'

From: General Dexter, Commander of the Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force (MEF)

Reference: The role of Muncerforce and General Muncerville.

There are concerns held by the MEF over the makeup, aims and role of Muncerforce and of General Muncerville that need to be brought to your attention.

That the role of Muncerforce is intelligence and not military and yet it is commanded by an experienced fighting officer yet who has no experience of intelligence functions nor of the politics of the area in which his command is to operate. An area fraught with ethnic, political and religious difficulties.

I believe that General Muncerville should have received his orders directly from me as Persia is within my sphere of command. General Muncerville instead is to operate outside my command and report directly to the War Office in London yet I am to provide him with logistical support.

It seems that the exact purpose of Muncerforce is unclear to me even after General Muncerville and I have discussed what they are, or appear to be. General Muncerville seemed happy to accept the lack of clarity for his role but to me this is a worrying state of affairs. I appreciate that the mission's role is 'most secret' but its objectives must be more clearly defined if it is to succeed and avoid going off at a tangent.

It seems that whoever devised this plan must have had a very small-scale map indeed. Muncerforce must travel some 700 miles over mountainous tracks, hardly suited to motor traffic, to the town of Kirkuk before having to go a further 200 miles of unmetalled road to the Caspian Sea. Once the mission reaches the Caspian it then has to find ships to cross to Baku and points further on! Already my command has supply lines that run from Basra to Baghdad they are inordinately long and this Muncerforce venture will stretch them to breaking point. To illustrate the latter I give the following example. I understand that one of the tasks that Muncerforce may have to carry out is the blowing up of the oil wells in Baku, of which there are 2000. These wells can be up to 500 feet deep and are lined in concrete. The amount of explosives to perform the above task exceeds what we have available here, which is already earmarked for our own requirements. Whilst Muncerforce carries out the sabotage of the wells I doubt that the locals will be standing idly by allowing this to happen. Turkish and German agents are currently appearing in Persia and it is more than likely that some of the local Persian tribes will be stirred up by the former to physically oppose the Muncerforce mission.

The makeup of the officers and men for Muncerforce with its mixture of troops from New Zealand, Australia, Canada and England under the command of Indian Army Officers seems a recipe for disaster. A disaster because of the known antagonism of our colonial allies for British, in particular Indian Army, officers.

The whole group of men plucked from the Western Front, Salonika, Palestine, and some from my own command have not had the time that they need to develop teamwork. Teamwork being so necessary for what they have before them. In addition there appears to be a mismatch of background and skills to such an extent that they appear to be a bunch of men who will remain independent of each other rather than be important cogs of a cohesive team.

On the nature of the men in Muncerforce. It has been reported, by a senior officer in my command that the troops serving in Muncerforce

appear to be the most undisciplined and unmilitary group of officers and men he has yet come across in this war. The latter fact may result in a loss of morale of the troops here in Mesopotamia.

Finally Muncerforce because of its lack of objectives and the strange structure of its makeup could damage the MEF and the achievement of its objectives.

Rixon blotted the document he had been writing before he sat back and looked at McColl. 'Well?'

McColl raised his eyebrows as he handed the report back to Rixon before he spoke. 'Dexter does not grasp that the whole point of our sending Muncerforce into Persia without clear aims is because we do not know what the true situation is. We will clarify Muncerville's objectives when he clears away the fog that surrounds the Caucasus and North Persia. As to questioning Muncerville's ability to command, General Dexter perhaps has forgotten that Muncerville has been a successful fighter on India's Northwest frontier and one reason for that success was his excellence in gathering intelligence on Pathan movements and threats. Finally as to Muncerforce's mission being top secret, well that was what was agreed between us at the War Office, the Foreign Office and India. We all need our fingers in this pie because of its strategic implications. I do not understand why he thinks Muncerforce could damage the Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force's credibility. However, because we are expecting Dexter to supply the mission I was just wondering whether we ought to increase Dexter's budget to pay for Muncerforce's costs?'

'There is no spare money,' Rixon shrugged.

'We could try and get more boats and trucks to help with his supply problem.'

'Can you dig any up?' Rixon looked at McColl who shook his head, 'I will reply to Dexter today. Now it must be two weeks since we heard that Muncerville was setting off for Enzeli I assume he has arrived?'

McColl grimaced as he glanced at Muncerville's latest communication. 'Yes and no. General Dexter obviously had a crystal ball. Muncerville arrived at Enzeli to find that Russian Bolsheviks control the town despite it being Persian territory. These Bolsheviks, who everyone calls Bolos, refused him entry to Enzeli and told him that British troops were unwelcome there and would also be unwelcome anywhere in the Caucasus. The newly created Caucasian State has a Bolshevik government. This state though now ostensibly independent from Russia is however, according to Muncerville's reports, still controlled from Moscow by the Bolsheviks.'

Rixon interrupted, 'I was talking to the Foreign Secretary on the train back from Paris yesterday and he said that when the Turks get close to Baku the local Bolos, who are all Armenians, will not be listening to Moscow but to us.'

'It might be too late by then. What about General Muncerville going into the Caucasus without the Bolsheviks' blessing, sir?'

Rixon thought for a moment before replying. 'We have to remember this scallywag of a Bolo leader, Lenin, was sent into Russia by the Germans. It seems as though he is trying to be independent from German influence.'

Therefore, what we do not want to do is push him and his crew back into Germany's arms and the Russians switching sides. Anyway,' he said indicating Muncerville's communication, 'Muncerville is clearly in no position to enter the Caucasus yet.'

'No and it gets worse. The Persian pro-nationalist Jangali tribe, whose land runs along the Persian Russian border round Enzeli, told Muncerville that unless he withdrew they would attack him. As the Persian Government has no control over this tribe and Muncerville has only a handful of men with him, he has withdrawn to Hamadan over a hundred miles away, where he'll wait whilst the rest of his force to arrive from Baghdad.'

Rixon murmured, 'so, Muncerville may have to fight his way through to Enzeli if he does then he may arrive too late to do anything in Caucasus. Can Baratov help?'

McColl made a face and then said. 'It seems that despite General Baratov's best efforts and statement to us, the Russian volunteers are wavering. They want to go home as Lenin ordered them too—but as royalists they oppose him.'

'Go home, George, go home!' Rixon exploded, 'where would we be if our lot said, "we've been in France since 1914 it's now March 1918 we think we'll go home". I know what would happen, the bloody Huns would be in Piccadilly after about ten minutes and then you and I would have to learn the goose-step. Goose stepping for us? Both of us are too bloody old. So will Baratov manage to continue to fight?'

'Yes, according to our source, for the moment. It depends on who succeeds the Bolsheviks as Russia's government in the near future.' McColl paused, 'the Frocks,' McColl used the word the military disdainfully called politicians, 'are still trying to get these Bolsheviks to honour the Russian commitment to fight the Germans but that does not appear likely.'

'I know George.' Rixon shook his head in exasperation, 'these Bolos have reneged on their obligations for good and all by arranging first the armistice, and then signing this peace treaty with the Germans and Turks at Brest-Livorsk. Unless the Bolos are themselves overthrown by other Russians, who are willing to re-enter the fight against our enemies, the Frocks are wasting their time thinking otherwise.' Rixon pursed his lips before adding, 'what I find so deplorable is that these Bolos are giving the Germans the green flag to continue their invasion of Russia—their own country. They are not even throwing snowballs at the blighters.'

'Obviously not, sir, because according to our sources in Tiflis, the Germans are advancing steadily through the Ukraine. The Turks meanwhile are advancing albeit slowly towards the Caucasus. Which means?' McColl stopped to look at Rixon.

'They get their hands on Baku oil they beat our blockade and that could win the war for them.'

'If the Turks and Germans are racing each other to get their hands on the oil then this may cause problems between them.'

'Hope springs eternal,' said Rixon doubtfully and rubbed his chin with the fingers of both hands as he thought. 'It also means that we need General Muncerville across into the Caucasus, not back in Hamadan as soon as

possible. Now, who do we think will get to Baku first, Germans or, Turks, and how many men will they have?’

‘The Turks are much closer than the Germans. Our sources say they have eight to ten thousand men, equally made up of regulars and levies. As for the Germans we have no reliable figures because they are too far away. Baratov says he’s got four or five thousand men but that is questionable—it’s probably one to two.’

‘Either way we need to provide Muncerville with some fighting men first to get him to the Caspian and then the Caucuses. Get them from Dexter.’

‘I doubt if Dexter could spare more than a few hundred men and he will not like doing that.’

‘Has to be done, George, and quickly. You will inform Simla why we need them,’ Rixon said using the name of the Indian town where the Indian Army headquarters were based, ‘any other news from Persia?’

‘Foreign Office sources say that the Persian Nationalists in Tehran want an invitation from their government for the re-instatement of the Ottoman Turkish and German representatives there.’

‘Surely not, I thought we had the Persian Government in our pocket – they cost us enough gold!’ Rixon replied slumping back in his chair frowning.

‘Following the Russian withdrawal the Persian nationalists are getting bolder, stronger and they may even take over the government despite our bribes. In addition the Bolsheviks have sent a chap called Bravin to Tehran and he has been making announcements to the Persians,’ McColl said locking stares with Rixon.

‘About what?’ Rixon interrupted tentatively.

‘He has announced the details of our 1907 secret agreement with the Russians and our division of Persia. Bolshevik Russia says it wants to secure good neighbourly relations with Persia. To do that, Bravin is expected to rescind all agreements made by previous Russian Governments to Persia and to waive all Russian responsibilities in northern Persia,’ McColl shrugged.

‘So now our secret’s out, that’s excellent propaganda news for the Persian Nationalists.’

‘Yes, then there is a nasty bit? The Bolsheviks are asking Persia to join Russia in fighting the most rapacious and imperialist power in the world. No prizes who they mean by that.’

Rixon picked up a pencil and twirled it through his fingers before saying. ‘Us, perfidious Albion, we are to blame for the world’s ills yet again, George,’ he paused, ‘you are right though it bodes ill for us if the Russians succeed in stirring up the local Persians. God, as if we were not stretched enough.’ Rixon rubbed his face with the palms of his hands then elbows on his table he looked at McColl through his fingers and asked, ‘so what has the Persian government been doing about this chap?’

‘The Persian government does not recognise the Bolos as the legitimate Russian government because they seized power by coup d’état. Bravin has thus so far only been received informally. But, if these Bolos do all that Bravin says that they intend then, despite the Persian Government being in our pocket, they may recognise these Bolsheviks as the legitimate government of Russia.’

'Imagine having a revolutionary government officially accepted by the world,' Rixon exhaled slowly and noisily. 'So to sum up the situation as I see it. We have no reliable allies in the area other than Baratov and his small army. The Baku Bolsheviks probably want our help but the Moscow Bolsheviks won't let them accept it. We cannot enter the Caucasus against Bolshevik wishes in case we drive the Moscow Bolos into a pact with Germany. We cannot get to Enzeli. The Persian Government cannot control these Jangalis who are anti-British. Muncerforce is not a fighting force and if we have to use it for that purpose they are not the right types of soldiers and we are short of soldiers anyway. The Bolos are now trying to raise the Persians against us. That it?'

'You forgot Dexter,' interjected McColl.

'Him we can control. Taking all those points and the fact that Muncerville is held up, for how long we do not know; his chances of preventing the Turks or Germans seizing Baku are slim. So if our enemies get to Baku and the Caspian will they stop there? If not where will they go?'

McColl cleared his throat, 'I doubt they will stop. Turkish troops would be unwelcome in Persia because they and the Persians have fought one another for centuries and hate each other. So if the Turks reach the Caspian oilfield before the Germans they may not stop but go east across the Caspian into Turkestan. Russian Turkestan's population is ethnically Turkic so it is the same as Turkey's. Russian Turkestan border with India, in one place, is only a few miles which means it is a good a springboard for an Indian invasion by the Turks.'

McColl paused to see whether Rixon had any questions. After a moment's silence, McColl went on, 'there is no history good or bad between Persia and Germany. Germany has also ensured that she has allies amongst some of the so-called Persian Nationalists through bribery and promising them political power. The Germans if they reach Baku first could go south into Persia or, east into Turkestan or possibly if they have enough troops both directions simultaneously. Whatever they route they choose, India will be their eventual target.'

'So Turkestan is important to both of them.'

'Absolutely, I have some ideas as to what we can do in Turkestan perhaps to stymie any invasion by either Turks or Germans.'

'I like a man who gives me a solution before he tells me a problem. I have to go to my meeting with the Prime Minister now. Let us meet again this afternoon.'

Generals Rixon and McColl were standing looking at a map of Central Asia whilst they drank their afternoon tea. McColl put his cup down and began to talk.

'This morning we mentioned the withdrawal of the Russian troops in Northwest Persia and how that left our Mesopotamian army open to a flank attack and how we are rectifying that through Muncerforce. First, this afternoon I want to discuss the invasion of India by a different route than the one we discussed earlier. The best route for an invasion of India is not from Northwest but Northeast Persia. My reasons are that now Russian troops have completely withdrawn from that part of Persia, the place is empty. Then in addition,' McColl traced a line on the map, 'the Russian railway runs very close

to the north-eastern Persian border which brings it close to India,' McColl's finger stopped and hammered it on the map before turning, 'the railway gives the Germans or Turks a reliable and quick means of providing logistical support to their invasion troops. Something we know from when we expected the Russians to threaten an invasion of India back in 1905.'

Rixon recalled, 'I remember that invasion scare well being in Simla at the time. You and I both know Persian and particularly Eastern Persian roads are bad to non-existent that makes it difficult for them—Thank God.' Grim-faced he nodded at the map, 'go on.'

'It is only recently that we captured the last German agents in Persia some of whom had been active against us for three years. Before any invasion Turkey and German are bound to send agents into Persia. We are already seeing anti-British propaganda in Tehran. Now, if and when the Persian tribesmen - whether they are Baluchis, Jangalis, Lurs or any of the others - realise that the Russians are gone and the country is wide open they may go back to banditry or go on the warpath. We could lose even the support of tribes allied to us who supply the levies we use in our policing of Southern Persia and protecting the oil fields. Obviously as the Royal Navy relies on Persia for its oil we cannot afford to lose control there.'

'So, said Rixon, 'we have the same position in the east as that which we face in west Persia. We need troops in East Persia and we have not got any.'

'I have a recommendation that we put a mission of three to five hundred men, in Meshed, the main town in North-east Persia.' McColl pointed at the town on the map, 'just the presence of our troops there, I'm sure, will be enough to prevent any trouble before it starts. If we do not send troops immediately and trouble was to start then we would need even more troops to quash it. In other words, sir a stitch in time saves nine.'

'Good point. India will complain again that we are treading on their area of responsibility and because it's them who will have to find the men.'

'Tell them that military strategy is the responsibility of the War Office hence that is why we are treading on their toes. By giving them responsibility for raising the troops and managing the operations of the mission should sweeten the pill. Also if we tell them that they could soon be fighting the Germans and, or the Turks, I am sure they'll accept our reasons for the soldiers.'

Rixon grunted and looked beyond McColl as he thought out loud, 'Lord Surrige at the India Office can be so prickly.'

'I'm sure you can manage him, sir.'

'I hope I can George. Now, I have been thinking about what you said this morning about the German and Turkish advances into the Caucasus. Let me present a different scenario. What happens if Muncerforce gets to Baku or even Tiflis in Georgia before the German or Turks get there, and they are held on that line, is India safe?'

McColl grunted 'Not necessarily,' he pointed on the map at the Northern Caspian seaport of Astrakhan, 'the Germans may also be advancing directly east towards the northern shores of the Caspian. If they get to Astrakhan they could sail to Krasnovodsk the main East Coast Caspian Sea port. Krasnovodsk

is the terminus of the railway line that we have just been talking about, the one that runs along the Persian border.'

'Well we have no chance of stopping a German advance on Astrakhan but can we do something about them in Krasnovodsk or Turkestan?' Rixon drew his finger along the railway line from Krasnovodsk to Tashkent in eastern Turkestan.

'Well there is another problem for us in Turkestan. There are enemy prisoners-of-war who now this peace treaty has been signed will get released by the Russians. These could become part of an army to invade India.'

'How many prisoners do we think there are?'

'I don't actually know. Thirty thousand to three hundred thousand is our best guess.'

Rixon whistled 'Your guesses tend to be on the mark, George but that's a bit wide ranging. Mind you we will not have enough troops to stop that lot whether your guess is at the higher end or the lower.'

McColl smiled, 'I have a plan which means we don't need many troops.' McColl pulled out a document and handed it to Rixon.

Chapter 3

Hector Tarbox marched down Whitehall towards Trafalgar Square his face set against the cold March wind which cut through his long black woollen overcoat so much so that he regretted that he had not caught a cab from his office in the Houses of Parliament. Tarbox turned into Great Scotland Yard and spoke for a few moments to a man on crutches wearing the blue Army uniform of a wounded soldier. As he continued his journey Tarbox wondered if the war, "Over by Christmas" everyone had said in August 1914, would endure beyond this year into 1919, he shuddered at that thought. Tarbox entered Northumberland Avenue and quickly crossed the road and stopped in front of the Portland Stone building facing him. He reset his bowler hat before steadily mounting the granite steps and entering the entrance hall of the India Office.

'Good morning, I have a meeting with Lord Surrudge.' Tarbox said to the porter.

The man looked at a piece of paper attached to a wooden board, which said, "The Right Honourable H Tarbox." The porter added to himself 'Member of Parliament' and moved with a speed not normally associated with him. 'If you come with me I'll take you up to his Lordship straight away.'

'Come in, Mr Tarbox,' Lord Surrudge, the Secretary of State for India, stood up and stretched across his desk a long, thin and bony hand. Tarbox's firm grasp made Surrudge visibly wince a reaction Tarbox pretended not to notice. 'Please won't you sit?'

'Thank you for seeing me so quickly. I know how busy Government Ministers are,' Tarbox replied.

'My dear Mr Tarbox,' Surridge looked at him across his half spectacles and said, 'it is our duty to discuss matters of State with Members of Parliament, particularly if they happen to belong to the Prime Minister's Liberal Party.'

Tarbox bowed his head in response. 'I'll come straight to the point. I am here to discuss an invasion threat to India that I and a few of my colleagues have been discussing informally in the House of Parliament. I want to know what His Majesty's Government intends to do about it.'

Surridge said, 'what? I know nothing about this. Mr Grimes, my top civil servant, should hear this. Will you wait until my secretary fetches him?'

'Of course,' said Tarbox and as he disliked silence, he was after all a politician, he felt small talk was in order, 'I wonder what the spring will bring on the Western Front and what impact the Americans will have. I wish in some ways that we did not have to rely on them.' Surridge gazed at Tarbox a blank expression on his face, which Tarbox ignored as he added, 'I saw a battalion of them in Winchester the other week and not one of them was less than five foot ten.'

'Really,' replied Surridge and as he opened his mouth to say something he saw his office door open, 'ah, Grimes, come in.'

Grimes after being introduced to Tarbox sat beside him opposite Surridge.

'I thought you should be here, Grimes, Mr Tarbox has comments about an invasion of India.'

'What invasion?' Grimes looked shocked.

Tarbox leaned forward. 'Well actually it is a threat of, rather than an actual, invasion. All those German and Austrian prisoners of war in Turkestan could easily become an invasion army.'

'I don't follow you at all, Mr. Tarbox,' said Grimes after glancing at Lord Surridge who batted his eyelids in wonderment at what Tarbox had said.

'There are, according to my sources, something like 300,000 German and Austrian Prisoners of War (POWs) in Russian Turkestan. That, gentlemen, is an army. An army, which can and will threaten India, mark my words,' Tarbox sat back.

'Can I ask how you know this?' Surridge leant forward, put his elbows on his desk, his chin on his cupped hands and gazed at Tarbox.

'We have our sources in the House, Lord Surridge.' Tarbox looked wary.

'You have told us the how many prisoners there are but not why you think it they are a threat to India,' Grimes ventured.

'My dear Grimes. First, the POWs are enemy soldiers. Second, this peace treaty Russia signed at Brest-Litovsk will free all POWs and naturally they will return to the colours. Third, despite the treaty's terms I have no faith that the German army will stop where it is now. I understand that the German Army is continuing its invasion of the Ukraine on the look-out for food.' Tarbox paused for effect, 'then no doubt the Germans will continue: into the Caucasus; across the Caspian Sea; into Western Turkestan where they can be joined by these released prisoners from Eastern Turkestan. The obvious target then for the Germans is India.' Tarbox waved his arms as though the invasion was a fait accompli.

I agree the Germans may continue with their invasion of Russia but it is a long way to India from where they are now. I am guessing it must be nearly two thousand miles at least. Then how easily can these POWs become fighting soldiers again?' Grimes added with a shrug, 'some of them would have been captured, perhaps three or more years ago and may no longer be any good.'

'Quite right, Grimes, good soldiers are killed in battle.' SurrIDGE said with feeling.

Tarbox wondered how could anybody sitting in an office, warmed by a roaring fire, in London miles from action could have the impunity to question the courage or otherwise of soldiers. 'Wellington, Napoleon and Julius Caesar might dispute that Lord SurrIDGE,' he said trying to keep sarcasm out of his voice.

SurrIDGE flushed when he replied, 'point taken.'

Grimes eager to defuse the tension between the other two men interjected quickly, 'when I said "good" I meant that prisoners' rations are usually poor so they would be undernourished and not very fit. It would take them some time to get back to fighting trim. We know that not all the Austro-Hungarians would continue to side with the Germans anyway, Mr. Tarbox. The Czechs POWs, for example, when they return from Russia are committed to fighting for Czech independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire.'

'That is as maybe, Mr. Grimes. But I believe it also true that Hungarian, Austrian and German prisoners are joining and fighting for the Bolsheviks,' Tarbox responded.

'Do you now think that the Bolsheviks will also invade India?' SurrIDGE said.

Tarbox thought for a moment, 'possibly, let me remind you both about something. For fifty years or more the Russians were our sworn enemies in Asia. It was only because we signed that defence agreement with the French in 1905 that their allies, the Russians, became ours by default in 1907. And Mr. Grimes do you not agree, that Turkestan is the closest part of the Russian Empire to British India and it would be an ideal springboard for an invasion.'

'Yes, Mr. Tarbox it is a possibility,' Grimes conceded that point pursing his lips.

Tarbox was on his soapbox now. 'We know that the Germans have been sending agents through Persia and China to stir up trouble in India since 1914. Let me finish, Grimes let me finish,' he held up his hands at the Civil Servant, 'now with what we know about Russia and their known foreign policy before 1907 it would take very little for them to do an about face again and threaten India.' Tarbox sat back in the chair pleased.

'The Great Game, Mr. Tarbox, is what you are referring to,' mused Grimes.

'Yes, the Great Game, Mr Grimes, the nineteenth century's ongoing saga.'

'My dear Tarbox,' said SurrIDGE reflectively from the depths of his chair and stroking his chin with forefinger and thumb before wagging his forefinger at Tarbox. 'First, we seemed to have moved from a German to a Russian invasion.'

Tarbox shifted uncomfortably in his seat and interrupted, 'they could combine together. That's a possibility. The Germans and Russians have been allies in the past.' He looked at Grimes for support but received no body language indicator one way or another.

SurrIDGE continued, 'the second thing I was going to say, before your knowledgeable interruption, was that there was always the school of thought that the Great Game never really existed. That school thought it existed merely in the minds of those who wished to expand their fiefdoms beyond the British Empire's boundaries for their own gratification or glorification. The Great Game gave Indian Army officers a chance to go off exploring places where they shouldn't have gone in an effort to avoid soldiering. "The Great Game" myth sold an awful lot of newspapers in the last century because we needed a bogeyman. It was scaremongering of the worst kind.' SurrIDGE, a Conservative politician actually had always believed that the Great Game had existed but Tarbox was a political antagonist and had to be opposed at all costs.

'I am not sure your colleague, Lord Ballard, would agree with that statement, Lord SurrIDGE,' said Tarbox with a smile to which SurrIDGE reciprocated.

'Yes, George Ballard is a forward policy man. I think he believes the Empire should stretch from the Arctic to the Antarctic Oceans,' SurrIDGE said sarcastically.

'Wouldn't be a bad idea, my lord,' supposed Grimes.

'Oh yes, and who would pay for it all? You Grimes? Mr. Tarbox here?' SurrIDGE said deliberately sounding exasperated, which he hoped would hint to Tarbox that this silly meeting should end.

'There's the gun cotton to consider as well,' remembered Tarbox suddenly out loud.

'Gun cotton? What gun cotton?' SurrIDGE stirred in his chair and looked positively interested in the meeting for the first time.

'There was a report in the Times about a load of cotton in Russian Turkestan that the Germans want to buy,' Grimes said.

'Yes, according to a report I have, there's about twenty to forty thousand tons of the stuff,' added Tarbox, 'that could make an awful lot of explosives.'

'Have I seen this report, Grimes?'

'Page 5 my lord.' SurrIDGE picked up his copy of the 'Thunderer' and rummaged through it till he found the report. 'A four line report. That can't and doesn't say much.' SurrIDGE looked annoyed at Grimes before he read, 'it mentions the prisoners,' he looked at Tarbox and nodded, 'and the cotton.'

'Yes, but that is not where I first heard about them.' Tarbox shifted uncomfortably in his seat and wondered if he should tell SurrIDGE that his source was an American friend. The American had recently been in China, and had heard the information from a member of his country's embassy, in Peking.

SurrIDGE threw the paper on his desk, 'has Robbins up in Kashgar said anything about this, Grimes? Has he sent us a report? How did the Times get hold of this?' SurrIDGE read the piece again.

'Robbins' last report told us that there seemed to be complete turmoil in Turkestan—murder, theft and rape being perpetrated by not only these Bolos but by bandits, the local tribes and the anti-Revolutionary Whites. He was not sure just who is in charge in Tashkent.' Grimes threw his hands up, 'how the Times got the information we could find out, should I do that?'

'No, don't bother.'

‘Actually I think the cotton is more important than the soldiers in the short-term and that is really why I came to see you, Lord Surridge. The Germans could not invade India for months but the cotton could be in Germany in a few weeks. I got my secretary to check with the Board of Trade yesterday.’ He pulled out a piece of paper and read from it. ‘The Germans imported over three hundred thousand tons of cotton in 1913 mainly from the United States, three-quarters of the cotton was estimated to go on ammunition manufacture and the like. They got, it is estimated, only about fifty thousand tons in 1916 via neutral countries like Holland, Norway and Sweden. If a machine gun fires for three minutes it uses one bale of cotton as does one of our battleships when it fires a 15 inch shell. A bale of cotton weighs about 500 pounds so you can see why cotton is important.’

‘Think what price our soldiers will pay,’ Grimes uttered frowning.

Tarbox waved his forefinger in the air as he added quickly, ‘now we already know the Germans are after grain and other materials from the Ukraine. If the Germans buy the Turkestan cotton then all they have to do is get it to the Caspian Sea using the railway through Turkistan. Then, it is a short hop over the Caspian Sea to Astrakhan or some other Russian port under German control and then by rail from there into Germany. If the Germans can succeed in doing that then they defeat our blockade of their western ports. They defeat our blockade then who knows what?’ Tarbox shrugged his shoulders.

‘The Americans will be here before that happens, Mr Tarbox, surely,’ said Grimes looking to Surridge for support.

‘I hope you are right, Grimes, because they seem to be taking their time about things.’ The timbre of Surridge’s voice then changed to firmness. ‘The presence of German and Austrian prisoners in Russian Turkestan and the general upheaval in Russia is worrying yet I cannot see how they can threaten India.’ After a moment’s pause for reflection he added with feeling, ‘your point about breaking the cotton blockade, Mr Tarbox, is potentially a very explosive issue.’

Tarbox looked at Surridge and tried to determine whether the latter had intentionally made the joke—no, Surridge was incapable of that. Time to reveal the real reason why he was here, ‘I have an idea what we should do, Lord Surridge,’

Surridge was intrigued, ‘and what is that, Mr Tarbox?’

‘We do not know what is happening in Russia or, what their intentions are towards India. I believe it is time to revive the sort of thing we used to do in the last century. We need to send agents into Russian Turkestan to find out what is going on.’ Tarbox sat back in his chair and looked at the other two.

The man’s read too many spy stories, thought Surridge. There is a war on with thousands dying every day and this idiot wants to send someone on a wild goose chase. Surridge composed himself and then spoke, ‘the whole question of Russia is so complex. We cannot afford to go off half cock and alienate the Bolsheviks and drive them fully into the arms of the Germans—if they are not there already. We need a co-ordinated policy because we need to be sure that what we are doing reflects the overall policy of His Majesty’s Government. We will take your idea seriously, Mr Tarbox, but I will have to talk first to my

opposite numbers at the Foreign Office and the War Office.' SurrIDGE got up from his chair, 'now I am afraid that I have appointment with the Prime Minister if you will excuse me.'

'Of course,' said Tarbox not sure whether he believed him but the tone of the man's voice was clear. He stood and after bidding both of them, 'good day,' he quickly left the room.

'Well Grimes, what did you think of our Mr Tarbox?'

'He seemed well informed as I would expect a Member of Parliament to be.' Grimes replied cautiously.

'You mean he has read the morning papers,' snorted SurrIDGE. 'I am not sure about his statement that we in the "House" have our sources. When did Tarbox make the appointment to see me?'

'Yesterday morning,' said Grime.

'Oh before this snippet of news was even in the Times - very interesting. He might be right about a mission. Perhaps sending some agents out there may be useful. What do you think?'

'Just sending a couple of our chaps won't cost much.'

'I like that thought. Tarbox is a Member of Parliament so we ought to be seen to be taking some action otherwise he might say something we don't like in the House. We ought to ask the Foreign Office to tell us more about what's going on in Russia otherwise we will be doing one thing and them another. I'll send the Foreign Secretary a note to that effect.'

There was a knock at the door and Mrs. Streetham, SurrIDGE's secretary, entered the room and handed him an envelope. 'Sorry to disturb you, Lord SurrIDGE. This has just come from the War Office and as it is marked "Urgent" I thought you might want to see it straight away.'

'Thank you Mrs. Streetham. Don't go for a moment, Grimes,' as the latter made to follow Mrs Streetham from the room.

Lord SurrIDGE's face changed from impassivity to fury as read the note and when he had finished it he handed it without a word to Grimes. Grimes read it quickly and looked at SurrIDGE in amazement.

'They cannot be serious they just can't.'

'I do not believe it either. If the War Office brings this up at the Eastern Committee meeting,' he waved the note. 'I'll stonewall them until we have got our own thoughts organised. So you know what that means?'

'You would like me to prepare a report based on what we know so far, draft proposals, plan of action, likely risks.'

'Yes, we can refine it later if after the meeting. Now please send in Mrs Streetham again, will you, there's a good fellow?'

'Do you think Tarbox knew about the War Office's note?'

SurrIDGE stared at Grimes for a moment, 'no, I do not see how.'

Grimes about to leave again hesitated, 'I've just had a thought, Simla. Don't you think they should get to know of this sooner rather than later? We don't want them hearing about this from the War Office because we would look incompetent and slack if that happened.'

Surridge sat thinking, 'I had better find out just how far the War Office has got with this,' he waved the note. 'They are unlikely to have told India anything yet. Get your draft to me by close of play tonight.'

'What time are you expecting that to be, my Lord?'

'I think I will have to be working really late,' he paused looked at the time, glanced at the pile of papers on his desk; thought for a moment which did not fool Grimes for an instant, 'probably half past six.'

Chapter 4

Edrich sat in his office doing one of the jobs he detested - reading the weekly Shushtar trade statistics produced by Roy. As he studied: the total number of caravans that had entered and left Shushtar; what they had carried: the number of camels and horses that each caravan had contained his mind began to wander. Depression set in triggered not only by the thought of his intended demise, but also where it might occur and when.

Sixteen years a soldier and a political officer in India had taught him that death was a hazard of the jobs so that was not his problem. What brought him low was that he had never been married and death here in Persia now would ensure he never would be and he'd have no heirs. Daisy Hullah from his home village was whom he thought he'd marry because the warmth of their correspondence over a six-year period seemed to indicate this. Daisy however had married a banker whilst he had been at Gallipoli. Edrich tried to recall her face, voice, the way she moved and spoke but nothing came to him. He had met no one else that he had liked so much since then not even one of the nurses who had attended his wounds.

Actually that was not true for when he was wounded a second time whilst in France he had liked Nurse Greaves. He smiled ironically to himself because he had never known her first name. He wondered if he had taken her fancy. Then he decided probably not because nurses had so much choice thanks to the number of casualties generated by the Western Front or indeed all Fronts. Then no sooner had he recovered from his wound then he was out to India and the North West Frontier where there were no women; well not ones he could marry.

A great feeling of being alone swept through him despite the fact within the building there were twenty or thirty people he could talk to at this very moment. Sure he could talk to a Persian clerk or an Indian trooper but what would they have in common? Loneliness to him meant that there was no one to talk to in English about the really important things like the latest novels, English politics, cricket, painting, and the impact of motor transport on the horse trade or the gossip about Edward VII and his mistresses. On reflection with a giggle he realised that Edward had been dead for the past eight years so nothing worthwhile had happened recently on that subject. He stared into the middle distance his thoughts switched nostalgically of home. It would be spring there or it soon would be. Edrich decided he'd love to look out of his bedroom

window at his mother's house in England and see her daffodils and primroses; the birds would be nesting and making a racket early in the morning—the sole purpose being to waken him up.

Finally his thoughts switched to this his latest lonely posting in a fly blown Persian town without another European in it and where the summer was so hot the locals lived beneath the ground. And all he was doing, he looked at the paper in front of him, was counting bloody camels and bloody horses with the occasional bit of bloody propaganda work in bloody Shushtar. What a bloody life. A pounding on his office door rudely shattered his melancholy.

'Sarder Sabahi and Houshang Azari are here to see you, Major Edrich,' announced Roy. 'I have put them in the usual room and said you would be delayed for a few minutes.'

'Good. You did not say anything about my feud?

'No.'

'Well maybe they'll volunteer something and give us a clue about any support that the Lurs have in the town.' Edrich selected two pencils checked them for sharpness. He looked at Roy who smiled at him and lifted up first a sheaf of paper and two pencils in his right hand and in his left hand a lamp. Edrich nodded with his head towards a door and Roy lit the lamp.

The two men left the room silently opening and closing the door that was situated behind and to the left of Edrich's desk. The room into which the two men entered was little more than a large cupboard having neither window nor door other than the one the men had just used. They sat down on the two stools adjacent to the walls, Roy turned up the lamp and then each man put on a set of earphones. The earphones had a cord whose ends were attached to the wall. As the pair listened they scribbled notes, Roy almost continually, Edrich only from time to time. They sat in the cupboard for half an hour or so before Edrich pulled his watch from his tunic pocket and looked at the time before he showed it to Roy. Edrich removed his headphones and got up Roy did the same as soon as he had finished writing. The men left the room as silently as they had entered it.

'So they appear to know about the plot to kill you, but not where the assassins are at the moment,' Roy whispered as they walked through Edrich's office.

'It would seem so. As men with opposing views we know they don't trust one another. They didn't appear to say anything of value, did they?' When Roy shook his head in reply Edrich continued, 'still write your notes up when we have finished so I can see if I missed anything. I feel my Persian, sorry—Farsi—is getting better but it is still inadequate. Wheel them in otherwise they might wonder what we're doing.'

Sarder Sabahi was the editor of the local paper 'Truth' and was supportive of Britain and British interests. A major reason for Sabahi's support for the British was the subsidy of 500 tomans a month they paid him. Edrich made the payments on the last Friday of each month, in the tiny room close to the Residency's back door which was rarely used except by those seeking to enter or leave the building surreptitiously.

Houshang Azari editor of the Shushtar 'Freedom Today' newspaper did not receive a British subsidy because he was a supporter of the Persian Democrat party who had been trying since the war began to oust the Russians and British from Persia. Azari might have actively supported the Germans provided they had soldiers close at hand rather than in far off Ukraine. On the other hand he would never have supported Persia's enemies the Turks. So if ever German and Turkish troops were to arrive in Persia together Azari would be in a dilemma.

Edrich like his predecessors conveyed the news about the war when the newspapermen were together, thereby hoping that Azari would not realise the duplicity of Sabahi. The source for the news of the Allied war effort was the 'Mesopotamia Times' a veritable bible of information produced on a weekly basis in Baghdad and forwarded to all political officers who were administering territory under British control whether it be in Mesopotamia or Persia. Europeans produced the Mesopotamia Times for Europeans and as such Edrich found he had to edit the news for local consumption. The current issue he had received dealt with the big German Offensive in France in which the British and Empire troops had suffered a near defeat.

Edrich had to gauge how much the two Persians opposite him had learned from other sources and how he could put the retreat in terms that they both understood. He had to be careful not to exaggerate too much and to avoid lying. Anti British Persians based in Teheran, had access to German sources of information that they ensured was forwarded to every town that published a newspaper.

'There has been a big battle in France between the Germans and us.' Edrich cleared his throat, 'the Germans who have benefited by the withdrawal of Russia from the war have been able to send two hundred thousand more men to fight us. The Germans know that to win the war they must beat the British, not the French, the British. They attacked one of our armies and so we have withdrawn a distance of say,' he hesitated, 'the equivalent of half a day camel's ride from Shushtar.'

'That is a long way,' said Azari.

'Only if you have a racing camel and ride fast,' replied Edrich without a moment's hesitation.

'Are you saying that the Germans inflicted a defeat upon you?'

Edrich had known of course that this question would arise from Azari. He had his answer already but decided to let silence rule for a moment. 'A defeat no, a forced withdrawal, yes.' Edrich saw both men looking puzzled he went on, 'what happened gentlemen is this.' He took up his pencil and drew on a sheet of paper a half oval then he wrote the word British inside it and German round the outside of the oval. Edrich turned the piece of paper round so that both men could see. Using his pencil as a pointer, 'as you both will remember for a year and a half we British have been driving the Germans back however, the French here,' he drew a straight line at the bottom of the half oval, 'and the Belgians here,' he drew a straight line on the other side of the oval, 'have not been as successful. This has left us with the danger of being surrounded. The Germans have attempted to surround us and to prevent that we have retreated

to new strongholds and have thus straightened our line. Doing that means we no longer have enemies on three sides.'

'So the British have not suffered a Cannae, have they Major Edrich?' Sabahi said referring to the famous Carthaginian defeat of the Romans nearly two thousand years previously.

'Absolutely not, if we stayed in this bulge, caused by the French and Belgians, we would have.' Edrich tapped his diagram forcefully with the pencil leaving an indentation in the paper.

'I have heard that you have lost many guns, men and equipment,' said Azari watching Edrich closely.

'Yes, we have,' said Edrich. 'We have lost as many guns as there are stalls in the Market Place, as many soldiers as there are citizens here in Shushtar.' He paused and looked directly at Azari and leaning forward said almost whispering. 'The Germans though have lost twice as many soldiers as there are citizens in Shushtar.'

'How do you know that?' asked Sabahi looking genuinely puzzled.

'It is a known fact that if you are the attacking army you lose twice as many soldiers as the defending army,' Edrich's voice rumbled with authority.

'But, Major Edrich,' said Azari deliberately, 'we have been told in the past by you and your predecessors that the British kept attacking the Germans because that was the only way to defeat them. It was said that by continually attacking the Germans what you call morale in the British army would be high and it was this morale that would see you defeat the Germans. Do you now say that as the Germans are attacking their morale is now higher than yours, and therefore they will win the war?'

Edrich pretended not to understand Azari's question and so he asked Roy to translate for him. Edrich remained impassive whilst this happened for his pretence gave him time to think more clearly. When Roy had finished Edrich spoke slowly and carefully.

'Mr Azari, you would and I stress, would, have a point except for one thing - the blockade of Germany by our ships. This stops food and other materials like oil, of which Germany does not have enough, reaching her. This blockade of all goods will result in starvation and no soldier can fight on an empty stomach. What the Germans are doing is, and I am in no doubt about it, gambling on a last desperate effort to win before the Americans arrive. The Americans have more people than in a locust swarm and you know how damaging locusts are.' Edrich paused before adding, 'the Germans will be like flies caught in a web with the spider crawling towards them and you know what happens then, Buzz,' Edrich shook his head, shoulders and body in a parody of a dying fly but nobody laughed.

Sabahi took the opportunity to change the subject by asking Edrich about the possibility of a Lur threat to the town. Edrich wondered whether this was Sabahi's way of getting him to warn off the Lurs via Azari.

'I think not,' said Edrich shaking his head as if amazed by the thought, 'cavalry are now able to get to Shushtar in eight hours or less because the road to Dizful has been improved since last year's problems. The number of motor lorries being used by the British Army is increasing at the rate rabbits multiply.'

Motor vehicles travel like hawks and are faster than horses so in three hours they'd be here.'

Houshang nodded and for once looked impressed. Edrich wondered if they had even one lorry at Dizful. Edrich then asked the two editors what news they would be publishing in their papers and whether they would be using the information he provided to them. Sabahi spoke a lot without saying anything; Houshang on the other hand made it clear he was sceptical of what Edrich had told them and that he would be publishing the local views on the impact of Russia's withdrawal from the north of the country. Neither editor mentioned any potential troubles from the local tribes.

After the two Persians had left the Residency and Edrich was on his own he went to where Sabahi had been sitting put his hand down the back of the chair and retrieved three pieces of paper each densely covered in Farsi script.

Edrich took them off to his desk where he sat with his Anglo Persian dictionary and translated Sabahi's report into English.

The following report is based on communications I have received from Teheran.

It has been reported that the Bolshevik government have recently sent an envoy, Karl Bravin, to the Persian Government. This envoy brought a message from Lenin suggesting that discussions between the two governments should take place to set up good neighbourly relations. In addition Lenin invited the Persian Government to join in the fight 'against the most rapacious imperialist government on earth, England, whose intrigue has disturbed the peace of Persia and is destroying this great country.

Currently the Persian Prime Minister, Samsun us-Saltana and his Foreign Minister Vasuq ud-Daula, and the Persian Cabinet have not reacted to this invitation. Discussions within the cabinet apparently show that the Persian Government is not yet convinced that the Bolsheviks are fully established as the Government of Russia. There is also the added complication that the Russian Imperial Government still has representatives in Teheran. The government will make no decision as to whom it will sign official agreements with until the eventual winner in the Russian civil war emerges.

Kuchik Khan's Jangalis continue to block the Hamadan Enzeli road to General Muncerville's column of British troops, on its route to the Caspian. Also the refusal of this tribe to acknowledge the current Persian Government means that the latter is looking to General Muncerville and to the Imperial Cossack General Baratov to provide a military solution. The Cossacks however are currently withdrawing back to Russia and it is not clear whether they will support an operation against the Jangalis.

The Persian Government needs the Jangalis to be brought under control for their own prestige and standing in Teheran. There is a worry that the Shah will use the excuse of the arrival of Bravin and the Jangalis current military success to replace Samsun us-Saltana Government with a Prime Minister and government from the Democratic Party. A successful

advance of the Turks and Germans to the Caspian will be the lynch pin in the Shah's decision to replace Saltana.

A threat has been made against the life of the British Political Officer in Shushtar, Major Edrich. This threat is both a response to the hanging of the Lur rebels in Shushtar last year and a reaction to the current difficulties the British are having in North West Persia. It is felt that the murder will not be attempted until orders are received from Teheran. There is a problem for the Lurs in that many of their tribesmen are working on the oil pipeline and are vulnerable to a possible British retaliation.'

Edrich put his pen down and thought about the last sentence of the report. On the one hand he was pleased that people in Teheran had to approve of his murder and they were wary people. On the other hand all tribesmen in Persia were notoriously independent of Teheran and liked to make their own policy. Edrich wondered if the money being earned by the Lurs on the pipeline could persuade the tribe's chiefs to stay their hand for the moment at least—he hoped so. Edrich was pleased what Sabahi had put in that last paragraph because at headquarters in Basra, on the Persian Gulf, when they read that his life was in danger they surely would send him more troops. On reflection he doubted if there were any spare troops to help him. As to the information about the shenanigans up in North Persia, Edrich was sure Basra would be receiving that from its other sources.

Once Edrich had completed his translation and reworked it into good English he used his code-book to encrypt the report. The encryption complete he got Roy to take the report to the local telegraph office for transmission to Basra. Once Roy had left Edrich returned unwillingly to the Shushtar caravan statistics. Unable to concentrate he abandoned his reading and then his office. Once in his quarters he began a new painting of the Hampshire Downs based on a photograph for its composition but on his memory for colour. As he painted the threat of his own murder moved from the front to the back of his mind.

Chapter 5

'The Foreign Secretary is here, Prime Minister.'

Rhys Pugh gratefully pushed aside a mound of papers on his desk. 'Good morning Arthur, thank you for calling in so promptly.' The Prime Minister before Arthur Ballard could sit said quickly, 'I thought we should discuss a few things before we go off to this Eastern Committee meeting. Can you bring me up to date with the American view on Russia and describe exactly where we are on that score?'

Ballard sat back in his chair and after thinking for a few moments he began. 'Well as you know Prime Minister, President Hickson's public and private personas are very different when it comes to these Bolsheviks. The major Allied

powers France, America and ourselves have agreed a strategy as to how we are perceived throughout the world. France and Britain are playing the imperialistic villains whilst America is playing the 'holier than thou' champion of peace and democracy both inside and outside America.'

'The advantage of this policy being that it merely reflects what all other countries think about us anyway?'

'Precisely, Prime Minister, but the Americans are extremely worried about these Bolsheviks rescinding payment of their war debt.'

'Their big bank barons won't like that, nor will ours,' Pugh muttered.

'Well unbeknown to anyone including his own Secretary of State, Mr Lewin, President Hickson is channelling funds through France and us to the opponents of the Bolshevik Russian Government.'

'How successful is that appearing to be?' The Prime Minister stared at the Foreign Secretary.

'We are having difficulties transferring funds to the Russian Banks that we have just bought. We are hoping to resolve those difficulties soon. Another part of our problem is, knowing who is on the Bolsheviks side and who is on the anti-Bolshevik side. If we don't know that, whom do we pay? Some bad news on that topic - we have just heard that the leader of the southern anti-Bolsheviks, General Kornilov, is dead!'

'How?'

'Apparently he has killed himself as a result of the completely shambolic situation in Southern Russia where the anti-Bolsheviks are as much at loggerheads with each other as with the Bolsheviks!'

'Seems to be the way in Civil Wars,' Rhys Pugh sighed.

'Still at least none of our Allies want these Bolsheviks in power any longer than is feasibly possible.'

'Absolutely not,' barked Pugh, 'we are already beginning to have problems with workers fuelled by Bolshevik ideas here. We can't have that in the middle of a damn war. What about the French and their sphere of influence in Russia what do our sources tell us?'

'They are bogged down in the Ukraine and the Crimea and they are quite unable to stop the Germans advancing south towards the Black Sea.'

'That is worrying, Arthur. We are lucky the French agreement let us have responsibility for the Caucasus and Asiatic Russia. The Germans and Turks are miles away from both areas at the moment which gives us time to sort out our defences for Persia and India.'

'Well, I am hoping the war will be decided in the west well before the Germans or Turks get close to our responsibilities,' responded Arthur Ballard sounding positive but not feeling so.

'I'm still convinced Arthur that we can and should win the war other than on the Western Front but let us not get into that now.'

'No, Prime Minister, that is a red rag to our military bull,' Ballard replied thankfully. 'Back to President Hickson, for a moment, because I have heard that he is now likely to support Allied intervention in Northern Russia.'

'That is the best news I have had today,' beamed the Prime Minister, 'tell me more.'

'The reason President Hickson is likely to approve of intervention in North Russia is because the military stores the Allies sent to Russia in 1917 have never been used and remain at the port of Murmansk. Those stores are in danger of being seized by German troops who are currently advancing northwards into that part of Russia and the Bolshevik government is too weak to stop them. The Allies discussion about the best way to stop the Germans is to send our own troops to protect those stores. Unfortunately the landing on Russian soil of allied troops without Bolshevik permission, currently unforthcoming, would be a breach of Russian sovereignty.'

'Such a breach could drive the Bolsheviks into the arms of Germany. We don't want that, Foreign Secretary.'

'No, Prime Minister. I think though the president might not be bothered about breaching sovereignty in that case. On the other hand President Hickson will not support a Siberian intervention because he is worried that although the Americans would invade it for altruistic purposes the Japanese would join them for selfish reasons—Japan needs Siberia's natural resources. We feel that the Japanese will only move into Siberia if America does the same, so nothing happening there for the moment.'

'Competition, Arthur, it is all about competition. America I am sure is the coming power in the Pacific particularly with China so weak. The Japanese with one of the largest armies in the world will be America's only opponents for region domination. I feel the Japanese, although our allies for the moment will be a threat to our Asiatic interests in the future. We shall have to try and persuade the President to change his mind about Siberia which may be easier now he is gung-ho over Murmansk. Anything else?'

'Just the Russian Baltic navy. The Admiralty is still worried that if the Germans seize those ships the naval balance tilts to the Germans.'

'They got a bloody nose at Jutland so I doubt that they will come out from their harbours again. If for no other reason that they haven't much oil and as they haven't been to sea for two years they must be out of practice.' Rhys Pugh glanced up at the clock as it struck the hour. 'Well come on then, Arthur, let us go and see what the Eastern Committee has to say.'

The British Government managed its war efforts by a series of committees many of them overlapped and had the same attendees. General Rixon had had to contend with so many committees when he was getting his Muncerforce idea adopted, in January 1918, that he proposed the setting up of an Eastern Committee. The Eastern Committee was to co-ordinate strategy for the Eastern Fronts, Persia and the Caucuses and it was intended to remove inter-departmental wrangling.

The Eastern Committee's chairman was George Merson, one time Viceroy of India and acknowledged, particularly by himself, as an expert in all affairs east of the Mediterranean. Merson felt that he above all others understood Britain's relationship with the Moslems. Amongst other senior government official members of the committee: were Arthur Ballard—Foreign Secretary, Ballard's deputy—Robert Charles, Lord SurrIDGE—Secretary of State for India, General Rixon—Secretary of State for War, and Colonel Baxter—the War Cabinet secretary who also acted as secretary to this Committee. Rhys Pugh, the Prime

Minister, was not a Committee member but this day he was attending because the War Office had a proposal they were presenting to the Committee. As the proposal related to the complexity of Britain's policy to Persia, Russia and the state of Russian affairs particularly in Asiatic Russia the Prime Minister's input was seen as vital.

The meeting began promptly and after the minutes of the previous meeting had been read and agreed Ballard moved to the next item on the agenda. 'Trans-Caucasia, gentlemen. I will ask Colonel Baxter to read a summary of our latest intelligence from our sources in the region.'

All eyes moved to Baxter who read the following report.

The Trans-Caucasian Republic under pressure from the advancing Turks and Germans has abolished itself and has been divided into the separate republics of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The Bolsheviks have assumed control of Baku with the help of the Armenians. Reports of fighting between the Russian and Armenian Christians against the Azerbaijani Muslims over control of Baku have been confirmed. We understand that the Muslims are defeated and the town remains under the control of the Baku Soviet. The result of this is, we believe, the Bolshevik position has been strengthened. The Azerbaijanis and other Muslims are looking to the advancing Ottoman troops to rectify the situation. Currently the Ottoman army is moving east but is between two and three hundred miles from Baku and since Brest-Litovsk no Russian troops are opposing them.

We have additional reports that the Georgians are so unhappy at the prospect of a Turkish presence in the Caucasus area that they are talking to the Germans about protection. The Bolsheviks are blocking any help that we could offer to them or the Armenians from North Persia; they will not allow any of our forces into the area.

The British force known as Muncerforce and commanded by Brigadier Muncerville that has been sent to help support the protection of Baku still remains bogged down in North Persia by Jangali Tribesmen. It is hoped that Muncerforce will reach the borders of Trans-Caspia soon and that local Bolshevik approval will be obtained to enable Muncerforce to move to the Caspian Sea and subsequently be allowed to cross to Baku when shipping is available.

Baxter put the piece of paper back down on the desk and looked at Ballard who gave an almost imperceptible nod of the head.

'Obviously this is serious. Yes, Lord Surrudge,' Ballard saw Lord Surrudge raise a finger.

'I assume that it was made known that Government of India agents are working diligently to get permission from these Bolos for Muncerforce to move across the Caspian to Baku?' Surrudge had to make sure that India's role was acknowledged as being paramount round the Caspian. India could not afford to lose control to the Foreign Office.

Ballard moved forward in his seat and caught Merson's eye. 'May I reply to that?' Merson waved a hand for Ballard to continue, 'yes, India's role was acknowledged. Just for those who would like to know what is happening elsewhere in Russia? German officers are being seen everywhere in Petrograd.'

One bank only is currently permitted to trade in Moscow—a German one. We believe that there is a real danger that Germany will come to exercise political control of Russia in the near term, but for how long?’ Ballard looked into the distance and sucked in his breath as he thought for a moment and replied to his own question. ‘Probably not long, but maybe long enough to influence the fighting on the Western Front. We know the Germans and the Turks want Baku oil. We think that the Germans and the Turks could,’ he thought again for a moment, ‘possibly come to blows or at least fall out over this oil.’ Ballard sat back in his chair took out his matches and lit his pipe.

Silence reigned for a moments before Merson spoke, ‘thank you, Arthur. We need more information on that whole subject and I suggest we review the Muncerforce situation next week if he has not got or he is not in the actual process of getting over to Baku.’

‘Muncerforce’s delay we expect to be short-lived. We are in the process of finding him more soldiers, not an easy task, to enable Muncerville to force his way through to Enzeli,’ Rixon said.

‘Foreign Secretary,’ Surridge interrupted, ‘India has been denuded of soldiers in those areas where we have responsibility for fighting the Turk. Many of our best troops have been transferred to the Western Front. Can we not have some of them back for situations like General Rixon has just indicated?’

The Prime Minister who had sat quietly till now thrust himself eagerly forward, ‘I wish we could transfer them back Lord Surridge from that meat grinder called the Western Front. As you know I am convinced that if we knocked first Turkey then Austro-Hungary out of the war, Germany would fall too. Unfortunately my military advisors,’ at this he looked at Rixon who grimaced and looked deliberately heavenwards. ‘My military advisors,’ Pugh said again with emphasis, ‘have forced the government to concentrate all our efforts in the west.’

‘We have our Allies to think of and support,’ put in Rixon icily. ‘The French are at the end of their tether. This German attack we are undergoing is serious.’

‘Only thanks to the military incompetence of the French generals,’ Rhys Pugh spat. He had conveniently forgotten his support for the French General, Nivelles, whose methods had brought about the mutiny of the French army in 1917. ‘You reliably informed me that our lines would hold the Germans. It seems touch and go whether they will do so.’

General Rixon opened his mouth but took several seconds to form the words, ‘the German attack will be held. As has been said before, Prime Minister, that if the men available here in England had been sent to France as the War Office asked them to be this German advance would not have occurred.’

Rhys Pugh eyes narrowed as around the table papers were shuffled in embarrassment. ‘As I told General Haig the nation, through me, will not go on needlessly putting our citizens through the meat grinder of the Western Front with nothing to show for it.’

Merson looked at Pugh and Rixon exchanging glares, ‘perhaps that discussion belongs elsewhere, Prime Minister and General Rixon,’ quickly he looked at his agenda. ‘Gentlemen, let us move on to the next item, which is a proposal by the War Office that General Rixon will introduce. Because this is

such an important subject and relates to Russia and its role in the east it was thought wise to have the Prime Minister attend the meeting. General Rixon if you please.'

General Rixon cleared his throat then wiped his mouth with a spotlessly clean handkerchief. Not a hair on his head was out of place whilst the crease in his trousers was so sharp that there were those in the War Office, not generally his admirers, who felt that they could be used for cutting the German barbed wire in front of the trenches. 'The Russian position in Asia is as worrying as is its position in Europe. These Bolsheviks seem to be a threat to the very foundations of all we stand for in the British Empire but they are not opposing either the German or Turkish invasion of Russia. Therefore a major concern I have is the threat of a German or possibly a Turkish invasion of India. Both German troops, currently in the Ukraine, and Turkish troops, in Azerbaijan, are thrusting towards the Caspian and the town of Baku. We see both sets of troops as the vanguard of an invasion force. The Russian railway line that runs along the Persian border in Turkestan will be vital to both our enemies for transporting troops and supplies towards India.'

Rixon paused and allowed his gaze to traverse the table, 'German and Austrian soldiers currently in Asia as prisoners of war could also be used by these armies or even the Bolsheviks for an invasion of India. Our information is that the Bolos are recruiting all and sundry into their ranks. I think we all suspect that the Bolos are German agents hence my reference to them joining an invasion of India.' He paused again to emphasise his next phrase, 'possibly or even probably the Afghans would help anybody in an invasion of India. If an invasion threat becomes a reality then I believe we will be unable to cope given the shortage of men. We mentioned the Western Front, but we have shortages on all the other fronts - in Italy, in Salonika, in Palestine and in Mesopotamia. As we do not have the men to combat an invasion of India then we must have some other way of diverting an attack. I have two proposals that will try and stop any invasion attempts before they have a chance to get off the ground.' Rixon stopped and looked round the room; he had everyone's attention.

'We cannot afford to lose India, it is too economically important to us,' snapped Rhys Pugh.

'I think it is even more than that, Prime Minister. It is not only the very jewel in our crown but our chance to enlighten a noble though backward people. I've been saying for twenty years or more that the Russians were our enemies in the East and a threat to India. Our alliance with them was merely a temporary aberration,' Merson sermonized.

'Quite right, George, I think over the last twenty years we have got to know your views,' snapped the Prime Minister.

'Been boring us to death with it,' muttered Lord Surridge to no one in particular. As a member, like Ballard, of the Conservative Party he had been hearing the same thing from Merson's rubbery lips for what had the Prime Minister said—twenty years? It felt more like forty years.

'Albert, you had something to say?' said Rhys Pugh to Lord Surridge knowing what the answer would be.

'No, no Prime Minister just agreeing with you,' SurrIDGE replied trying not to show how offended he was that the Prime Minister had used his Christian name or his embarrassment that his previous comment had been heard.

Rhys Pugh stared at SurrIDGE till the latter looked away, 'we must get on as I am going to see His Majesty the King soon after this meeting—I must not be late for that.'

Rixon picked up a document from the table and read from it slowly and deliberately. 'Our first proposal is gentlemen that we close the possible Indian invasion route through Northeast Persia - with a military mission. This mission is needed to replace the Russian soldiers who were the peacekeepers or gatekeepers in the area, but have now recently returned home.' Rixon looked at SurrIDGE expecting him to say something but the man sat motionless. 'The mission's role will come into play as soon as possible and its importance will become paramount if and when our enemies cross the Caspian. We believe that the mission will have a political role as well as a military one although we see the former as secondary.'

'Can you explain what you mean by the political role, General Rixon?' asked Rhys Pugh.

'Turkish and Bolshevik agents have already appeared in this region of Persia and are spreading rumours of British atrocities in Mesopotamia and that Britain has an anti-Islamic policy. The mission's political task we believe will counteract all anti-British activity whether by agents or by propaganda. We think the mission should produce news-sheets showing the true state of the war just as we do elsewhere in Persia. In addition Moslems—from both Mesopotamia and Arabia—should be brought into Persia to demonstrate how Britain is supportive of Islam.'

'Who is going to pay for these people to travel to Persia?' SurrIDGE interrupted.

'India!' interjected Charles who thought he ought to say something at the meeting.

SurrIDGE let out his breath noisily, 'The India Office and the Government of India are not bottomless pits of money and you in the Foreign Office should know that, Charles.'

'Well the Home Government is not either, Lord SurrIDGE,' Rhys Pugh drummed his fingers on the table as he spoke. 'I think the General's point is well made. Our backs are to the wall at this moment in Europe and the least India can do is take on as much responsibility as she can.'

'That is unfair, Prime Minister,' expounded SurrIDGE, 'India is playing a very full part in the war. Those are our troops in Mesopotamia. Troops I might add that we could need on the Northwest frontier if the tribesman decided to go on the war path.'

'Quite,' uttered Merson.

Ballard took the pipe out of his mouth in order to speak, 'where are you suggesting this mission is to be based, general?'

'Meshed, Foreign Secretary.'

‘Ah Meshed I know it well.’ Merson smiled knowingly, ‘Prime Minister, Meshed is one of the most revered Moslem holy cities in Persia and receives many pilgrims from all parts of Persia.’

I was going to say all that, George but of course you had to interrupt and show off your knowledge, thought Rixon but he smiled and said, ‘thank you, my lord.’ Rixon allowed his gaze to traverse the room as he continued, ‘having Moslems who support our cause in Meshed we hope will have a positive impact on these pilgrims. Then when the pilgrims return home they will spread the true picture of our intentions amongst their fellows. I appreciate money is in short supply but with troops in an even shorter supply taking some Moslems to Meshed may be the cheaper of two evils and may prevent Persia tribesmen going on the warpath against us.’

‘Sounds a good idea,’ interjected Rhys Pugh though he realised as soon as he said it Rixon had not finished. ‘Am I right in that, my lord?’ He looked at SurrIDGE whilst Ballard bit his tongue.

‘I’ll accept they are cheaper Prime Minister.’ SurrIDGE said thinking that another battle was to occur that was more important to win.

The Prime Minister should really address the meeting through me, Merson, the Committee Chairman thought, but there was no point getting upset, ‘general, will you continue?’

‘We know there is this Bolshevik chap, Bravin, in Persia with the intention of causing Britain and India trouble. It seems these Bolsheviks have moved Russia from being allies to either being our enemies or, at least supporting our enemies. So we need to do something about that. Therefore, the other proposal the War Office should like to make is,’ Rixon paused for dramatic effect, ‘that we send a delegation from the Hejaz to Central Asia for the purpose of raising a jihad, holy war, call it what you will against the Bolsheviks and their supporters. The War Office has already informed the India Office of our proposal.’ Rixon sat back in his chair and studied the ceiling.

The silence, which greeted Rixon’s statement, was overpowering. SurrIDGE’s face already glum turned white then flushed to a soft pink. Ballard’s mouth actually opened in astonishment depositing his pipe into his lap whereupon he stood and brushed the ash off his trousers before sitting down again. Rhys Pugh looked at Ballard and SurrIDGE and on seeing their reaction shook his head as though he hadn’t quite believed what he had heard or the reaction he was seeing.

Rixon despite the reaction went on imperturbably. ‘The thinking is this. Hussein, the Emir of Mecca is leading the Arabs in the overthrow of the Turks and freeing Hejaz from centuries of Ottoman tyranny. He is the Emir of the holy city of Mecca and that makes him the leader of the Moslem world. So, who better to foment a holy war in Muslim Asia against our enemies—Germans, Turks, Russian? If we raise the Moslems tribes of Central Asia in a holy war this will not cost us anything in material or men—only gold.’

‘How much gold, General Rixon?’

‘That detail has not been worked out Prime Minister.’ Rixon suddenly felt uncomfortable as he had no idea.

'To borrow Lord SurrIDGE's phrase from earlier we are not a bottomless pit General Rixon, in fact I would say the bottom can be seen clearly through very shallow water at this moment in time.'

'Yes, Prime Minister,' replied Rixon.

'You forgot to mention the Emir is a direct descendent of the prophet. To a Moslem that is very important to them,' said Sir Arthur Ballard as he filled his pipe before he stabbed it at the general, 'and it aids your suggestion greatly.' The meeting watched him light the pipe.

Good point Arthur thought Rixon annoyed that he had not thought of it himself. 'Yes, and without your support Foreign Secretary I am sure that the Emir would not have moved so far down the road to freedom,' he forged a smile at Ballard.

'So I take it, Sir Arthur, you approve of this because the Emir's the Foreign Office's man in Arabia?' Rhys Pugh asked.

'He's his own man, Prime Minister,' said Ballard after taking his pipe out of his mouth.

'Excuse me if I'm wrong' said SurrIDGE getting angrier by the minute as he listened to the foregoing conversation, 'but if I remember correctly the Emir vacillated between the Turks and us for two or three years! In fact I recall he only started to do something active when we had already started to push the Turkish army back from the Suez Canal. I also seemed to remember that there was a long and protracted correspondence with the Emir as we, and I stress we, tried to persuade him to raise the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire. That is hardly the action of someone who is their own man.'

Ballard slumped back in his chair in despair. 'My dear Lord SurrIDGE as you know well the Emir could not throw his hat into the ring on our side until he was sure not only of our support but those of his fellow countrymen.'

'Arthur, as we have said in the India Office many times to you before. Your precious Emir is only one of the potential leaders of the Arabs. We still feel at India that Ibn-Saud, who controls much of Arabia, is the man that His Majesty's Government should be fully supporting. I would also challenge you as to whether the all Arabs currently under the yoke of Ottoman tyranny see themselves as fellow countrymen or merely as a confederation of tribes. Our contention is the latter, particularly as we and the French intend to share out the Arab lands.' said SurrIDGE as if lecturing a small boy.

'Hussein is the more malleable than Ibn-Saud, and that suits our purposes in the region admirably.' said Ballard fully aware that this contradicted his earlier view that the Emir Hussein was his own man.

Rhys Pugh broke in abruptly, 'Gentlemen now is not the time to discuss the merits of the men in question. I have a more immediate concern. I have to admit I am confused with regards to our position in Russia. We seem to be supporting every faction under the sun and there are goodness knows how many of them. Now we are suggesting that we support something new again. Why? Arthur you are privy to all matters of state so why do you support it, don't you think we are spreading ourselves too wide?'

Arthur Ballard reflected for a moment, 'I don't think so Prime Minister. It depends upon what our aims are both tactically and strategically. Let us move

away from the Arabian Peninsula for the moment and go back to Europe. One of our strategic aims must be to maintain the blockade to stop vital resources getting into Germany. I think what little we know about what is happening in Germany shows the blockade to be working. The Germans advance into Ukraine gives them access to wheat; that advance then brings them to the Black Sea and potentially onwards to the Caucasus and its oil. The Germans therefore are threatening the success of our blockade. Then we learn that there is another vital resource, cotton, available in Turkestan and that this cotton could be brought directly to Germany by rail. There is no way that we can do anything to stop that means of transport; the Royal Navy apparently has no ships that can cruise on rails.'

'So if our blockade is or, will be, completely undermined and that,' Rhys Pugh looked round the table, 'could mean the war going into 1919 or even 1920. Something I think we would all dread.'

Murmurs of agreement sounded round the table.

'You are assuming, Prime Minister, that either the Bolsheviks will allow the Germans to have the cotton and use their railway to transport it back to Germany.'

'Yes, Lord Surrudge but we all suspect that the Germans are virtually running Russia anyway,' Rhys Pugh replied gloomily.

'Even if the Germans are not running Russia we know the Bolsheviks will not honour Russian commitments agreed in 1914 because they signed this peace treaty with Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey and forgot about the Treaty of London they signed with us and the French in 1914 not to make a separate peace.' Surrudge tapped angrily on the table with his fingers to emphasise his annoyance.'

'I agree, with you on that point,' said Rhys Pugh and the others round the table again murmured their agreement.

'The problem is that we do know enough about these revolutionaries running Russia. This Lenin and this Trotsky do not seem to be aware of the niceties of diplomacy. They seem too fly by half, Prime Minister,' admitted Ballard. 'The Foreign Office has been looking at ways to find someone who will return the Russians to their commitments to the Entente. Kerensky we feel was, and still is that man. But getting him into power again?' Ballard let out a sigh of exasperation, sat back and studied his pipe as if that held the answer before he continued, 'that is very unlikely. Bringing the Central Asian tribes into conflict with Russia would keep her occupied and stop any chance that she might join the war against us. A Moslem holy war might check those Central Powers Prisoners-Of-War, currently still out in Russian Turkestan, from returning to fight in the west or invading India.'

'Fly is a mild way to describe those two scallywags, Foreign Secretary. There are various problems arising from what you have just said about a jihad. A jihad, or holy war, did not work for the Germans when they tried it to raise it in India or Persia from 1914 to 1916. There is little reason why it should work for us. Then there is something else,' said Surrudge looking intently first at the Prime Minister and then at the Foreign Minister, Ballard, 'we think these Bolo people may be a threat to India because of their ideas of revolution. Remember

we mentioned Mr Bravin earlier and the fact that he is out to cause us trouble in Persia.'

'Lord Surridge,' said Rixon calmly, 'we are not talking about Persia or a threat to India from Persia but the threat from Central Asia to India.'

'The trouble with the military is that they are too myopic. We, politicians, have to see the big picture.'

'Yes, and may I remind you we in the Imperial General Staff also do precisely that,' snapped Rixon looking daggers at Surridge.

'Gentlemen, gentlemen,' Merson interjected because he had not said anything for a while as much as performing his chairman's role, 'whilst it is true, General Rixon that we are not talking about Persia, Lord Surridge was making a relevant point about these Bolsheviks, and their threat of revolutionary ideas spreading throughout our Empire and its adjoining countries.'

'Thank you George, as I was going to add,' Surridge kept his temper, 'there are still many misguided people in India who would welcome external support against us. Perhaps, Prime Minister, we should deal only with some of these other groups in Russia and not the Bolsheviks at all.'

The Prime Minister leaned forward with an intense look on his face. 'Whilst I don't like these Bolsheviks and all they stand for at all, Lord Surridge, they are currently the government of Russia and we have to deal with them whether we like it or not. If the Bolshevik Government was made up of circus dwarfs we would have to deal with them, we must remember that. The fact that these Bolos seized power by force means that we can only deal with them unofficially and it will be up to the Foreign Secretary,' he looked pointedly at Ballard, 'to ensure they stay out of Indian affairs.'

'That may be difficult to do because for example these Bolos are already spreading their nonsensical ideas here,' replied Ballard.

'We are not Russia and we treat our people rather better than the Russians have ever done. We are a democracy. The Russians were, under the Tsar, a dictatorship though I'm not sure what they are now,' retorted Rhys Pugh. 'I repeat it is the Foreign Office's duty to ensure these Bolos keep their ideas remain firmly within Russia.'

'The price of democracy is eternal vigilance,' said Ballard quietly.

'Yes, thank you Arthur for that truism. Let us get back to the War Office's original suggestion of the possibly starting a jihad in Russia. One of my worries is if a jihad was started is what would happen to the Czechs?'

Czechs wanted an independent state from the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Allies had committed themselves to setting up such a state once the Central Powers were defeated. As a result of this promise Czech POWs held in Russia, now freed following the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, had promised to fight against the Central Powers. The Czechs had managed whilst in captivity to keep their military discipline and formation. They were already being assembled to be transported from their POW camps to Allied lines in Europe where they would help overcome the Allies shortages of men.

'I'm sorry, Prime Minister, I don't quite follow.' A frown crossed General Rixon's face.

‘Currently at least one of the Czech army brigades is already moving east from its POW camps in European Russia on its long journey to join our troops fighting on the Western Front. We know the brigade cannot come out through European Russia because the Germans are between them and us. So it has a roundabout journey that sees it going to Vladivostok and then via America to the Western Front. The journey to Vladivostok is by rail and the Russian Government controls that. So, two things come to mind. First, we must try not to give the Russian Government any reason to stop the movement of the Czech troops because we need them. Second, and rather different, the Czechs are Slavs like the Russians. The Czechs are fighting for an independent country and freedom from Austria-Hungary, which naturally we are supporting. Because the Czechs are Slavs they could play a role in swaying the Russians back onto our side.’

Surridge and Ballard both looked puzzled and spoke in unison. ‘You think that possible, Prime Minister?’

Rhys Pugh gave a theatrical gesture of surprise. ‘Russia actually entered this war to protect its fellow Slavs, the Serbs, from being bullied by the Austrians. There is a good chance that when it is seen both by the Russian Government and by the Russian people that, the Czechs are going straight from captivity to fight for an independent country which might just push the Russians back to our side.’

‘Bit of a long shot, Prime Minister.’ Ballard said re-lighting his pipe.

‘Hope springs eternal, Arthur. The Czech brigade must go through the Moslem territories of the Russian Empire namely the old Khanates of Bokhara, Kiva, and,’ he waved his arms about. He could never remember the name of the other Khanate. Ballard and Surridge who undoubtedly knew its name, which was Kokand, offered no help. ‘Correct?’

‘Not really, Prime Minister, the railway line the Czechs are on lies far to the north of those territories. Quite a long way north, actually,’ said Rixon. ‘You are thinking about the railway line that runs along the Persian border and up to Tashkent.’

‘I stand corrected. But tell me this, General Rixon do we tell these tribes, “stay within your borders,” and if we do will they obey us?’

Rixon shifted uncomfortably in his seat and replied unsurely, ‘I’m sure we can, Prime Minister.’

Rhys Pugh replied. ‘Say you are wrong and the tribes penetrate as far north as the railway line to Vladivostok. Will the Moslems only attack Germans or Russians? How will they know that the Czechs are on our side? How would they know the Czechs are Czech and not Russians?’ Rhys Pugh jabbed his finger at the general, ‘in a Holy War, a jihad, will not the Moslems attack all Christians? Will we be starting, as Lord Surridge said, a whirlwind we cannot control? They do after all call all Europeans, Franks.’

‘I hate the thought of people thinking and calling we Englishmen, French,’ snorted Surridge.

‘No worse than we Welshmen being lumped in with the English as we so often are,’ said Rhys Pugh with a twinkle. The knowing smiles round the table were a mixture of the genuine and the false.

Rhys Pugh looked at Rixon who taking his cue said, 'it is a possibility, Prime Minister, but I honestly believe the railway line the Czechs are using lies too far to the north of the Moslem territories for the tribes to reach it.'

'Still seems a bit dubious to me,' said the Prime Minister putting his chin in his hand and his little finger against his teeth and began to tap them with it. 'Genghis Khan went places he was not supposed to and he was a tribesman from around there. Opening Pandora's box is risky.'

It was SurrIDGE who broke the silence. 'I agree, Prime Minister but there is something else. May I remind everyone that the Germans have attempted on no less than three occasions to start a holy war, the jihad, you mentioned General Rixon. On each occasion the Huns had the support of one of the most important men in Islam—the Sultan of Turkey. On each occasion they failed to start a war even though the Germans told the Muslims that the Kaiser had converted to Islam. Then, one of the world's most eminent Moslem Kings, Emir Hazibullah of Afghanistan, whose country would normally rise up against us at a drop of a hat did not do so, even with blandishments and promises from the Kaiser. Also the Germans tried to get those namby pamby Persians to act, but apart from the efforts of that German blighters like Wasserstein they never really succeeded in a major way. If this is the case then why therefore does the general or the War Office think that we should succeed where the Germans failed?'

Rixon shuffled the papers before him on the table till they were neatly stacked then spoke. 'The British have a successful history of dealing with Muslim people whether they are kings, emirs or paupers. Do we not govern more Muslims through the Empire than there are Muslims outside of it?' Rixon looked round the room rather than directly at SurrIDGE.

'I'm not sure they always like what we do,' said Rhys Pugh 'if they did we would not have so much unrest in India.'

'All caused by outside agitators of whatever religion, Prime Minister; like the Sikhs who live in the USA; the Indian socialists or nationalists living in Germany and inspired by the Bolsheviki. This trouble is nothing that we in the India Office cannot handle,' SurrIDGE's voice sounded authoritative.

'I agree with General Rixon's comments about our knowledge and experience of dealing with Muslims and I would add,' Merson once Viceroy of India didn't need anyone to upstage him on Indian issues. Also when Lord George Merson spoke on matters dealing with Muslims he believed everyone in the room must listen, 'the Hun has never had the experience of managing Muslims. I know, I know Arthur,' Merson flapped his hands at Ballard, 'they bossed a few in parts of Africa, but they are small beer compared with our dealing with the Afghans, the Arabs and the Persians.'

'Or, the Pathans on the North West Frontier,' added Rixon.

'Thank you, Henry,' said Merson dismissively as he went on in a school masterly way, 'we understand the Muslims and when we have to adapt a little to deal with them we adapt—but not too much.' He shifted his chair and paused a second for effect before he continued, 'the Germans are arrogant when they deal with natives because they so rarely understand local culture or

local customs and end up treating everyone as an uneducated, backward peasant.'

'Which is actually what they are' retorted Arthur Ballard that generated smiles from the non-India hands round the table.

'Yes, Arthur, but we don't make it as obvious as the Hun. This is the difference we use this,' Merson tapped his head. 'If they'd used a bit more thought they would have done better in Persia and Afghanistan. The exception that proves the rule, look at Herr Wasserstein and his minor success with the nomads of South Persia compare his effectiveness with those of our Political Officers whether they are dealing with the Emir Hussein or Ibn-Saud. A holy war sponsored by us a Christian nation? I do not think so.' Merson sat back in his chair pleased with his sermon.

'So that is the German threat solved. You seem to have forgotten our Moslem foe.' Surridge snapped.

'Based on the figures we have,' Rixon flicked through his papers knowing what he wanted was not there but it gave him thinking time, 'we estimate the Turks won't have the men to invade India alone. The alternative is that the Turks would need German military support for any Indian invasion. If a Turco-German army were successful in crossing the Caspian, then the Central Asian tribes might join them but more for plunder than I suspect for jihad. Not calling it a jihad also avoids any problems the jihadists might have with the presence of Christian Germans in such an army.'

'Sounds like whoever starts a jihad starts a forest fire,' suggested Pugh.

Arthur Ballard studied his pipe and broke the silence, 'but what about the prisoners in Turkestan, what about the cotton, what do we do about that?'

'I am getting confused gentlemen,' snapped the Prime Minister. 'What are we dealing with here, the Germans? These prisoners? The Russians? The Central Asian Moslems? Persia? Cotton? A jihad? Something else entirely?'

'Could be all or, any combination of what you've just mention, Prime Minister,' said Surridge carefully.

The Prime Minister exhaled loudly and before sitting theatrically back in his chair, 'can we have India's view on the POWs?'

'Certainly, Prime Minister,' Surridge replied feeling comfortable for the first time in the discussion. 'We have no information as to the numbers or the physical state of the POWS. What India needs is information. It would seem to me with all due respect to the Foreign Secretary and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff that the Government of India and the India Office have responsibility for India, and it is our job alone, to find out exactly what is happening in Russia. We are thinking about how we will do this and we will have a suggestion,' or at least Grimes will he thought, 'by this committees' next meeting.'

There were murmurs of approval round the room which Surridge acknowledged with a nod of his head. 'I must say this. This holy war if we started it and it initially succeeds in doing what we want it to against Germans, Bolsheviks or Turks, can we then just put it out? I doubt it. If the jihad fails do we lose face—I think so. May I remind everyone that we have yet to recover our prestige from our defeat at Kut two years ago? Again I need remind no one here

how important maintaining our prestige in the east is. I do not think that at this stage of the war we at India can support a jihad and certainly we could not agree to a jihad led by Hussein of the Hejaz.'

Merson spoke after a long silence. 'Gentlemen I think that your suggestion of the jihad has been discussed enough. Have any of you anything further to add? Do we return to this jihad topic at some other time?'

Henry Rixon and Arthur Ballard looked at each other shook their heads hardly surprised their kite would not fly. SurrIDGE and Merson looked relieved and then the former caught first the Prime Minister's eye and then Ballard's.

'There are several other things I would like to say from India's view of things. First, we need to know about the cotton. We do not know if the Germans are buying it? Indeed have they bought it already? Can they actually transport it back home? Can we somehow interfere with the transport of the cotton if we needed to? Should we be trying to buy the cotton if the Huns have not? Second, the Bolsheviks appear to be running Turkestan but are they under the control of the Moscow Government or are they an autonomous local Bolshevik government?' He looked at Ballard and the Prime Minister but neither moved. 'Whichever it is, do they control Tashkent only or, the whole of Turkestan? If Moscow doesn't have control will the local tribesmen try and establish an independent state as it used to be fifty years ago? They have tried once last December and we know they failed but how big was their failure—has it for example ended any future plans they might have to win back their independence? We have many issues to resolve and I am convinced between the India Office and the Government of India that they will be resolved.'

'Rumours from Moscow say that the Bolsheviks are looking to grant autonomy to the Eastern Empire territories conquered by the Tsar,' said Ballard

'Rumours, Arthur, rumours.'

'Anyway,' went on Ballard ignoring Rhys Pugh's interjection, 'I thought your chaps, Albert, had someone up in Chinese Turkestan whose sole job was to listen to what was going on over the border in Russian. Isn't it that chap, Robinson?'

'Robbins actually,' said SurrIDGE. 'Well it's not his sole purpose, as you well know Arthur. All Robbins' recent reports to us indicate that very little information about what is happening in Tashkent or, anywhere else in Turkestan is available. Trade appears to have withered to almost nothing. Robbins has to tread a very fine line because that is a very sensitive area. Sensitive because it's on the border between China and Russia and we know the latter, in the past, have had an eye on expanding east and seizing Chinese Turkestan and then going on to Manchuria.'

'Apart from expansion for expansion's sake any reason they would still want to do that?'

'Yes, Prime Minister, there are religious and ethnic reasons for expansion into Chinese Turkestan. The tribes on both sides of the Sino-Russian border are mainly Turkic for example: Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Huis, Kyrgyz as well as Mongols. There are not many Han Chinese found in this part of China and that lack makes the Chinese authorities sensitive. As for Manchuria I think the

Russians just wanted that for territorial aggrandisement and possibly stop the Japanese from taking it over.'

'Rum lot the Chinese' interrupted Merson 'could never understand them myself so I suppose no one can.'

'I am sure your right, George,' said Rhys Pugh smirking in the direction of Ballard whose smile was rather broader. Rhys Pugh switched his gaze back to Surridge, 'Lord Surridge what about the Chinese?'

'Well Robbins has to be very careful that he does not take any action regarding Russia that Peking could take the slightest umbrage. If they were to feel we were doing something they didn't like then they might close the Kashgar mission and bang goes our closest listening post to Asiatic Russia. We would be blinded.'

'I think you mean deafened, Lord Surridge. So what can we do? Sorry George I'm usurping your authority.' Rhys Pugh turned to Lord Merson with a look he hoped looked apologetic.

'Perfectly all right, Prime Minister,' said Merson in a tone that could be interpreted to mean exactly the opposite. If Rhys Pugh noticed anything he did not show it.

Surridge waited a moment and then said. 'I think I have an idea of what we might do rather than start the jihad we mentioned earlier.'

'We know we've already abandoned the idea of a jihad, Lord Surridge,' Rhys Pugh sounded irritated, 'what is this idea?'

'Sorry Prime Minister, just recapping.' Surridge was flustered for a moment. He knew he should not have mentioned the jihad but he could not help doing it as a means of gloating over the Foreign and the General Staff. The Prime Minister need not have been so sharp with him; he was after all a Minister of the Crown. 'We send an official Indian Government mission to Russian Turkestan with a remit to find out the information we so obviously lack.'

'Are we going back to the Great Game, Albert?' asked Ballard frowning. 'I'm not sure our Bolshevik friends in Moscow would take very kindly to this proposal at all.'

'This Bolshevik Russian Government would surely take a mission like this as perfidious Albion at its worst. They would think that we would be stirring up the Moslem tribes against them—in other words a jihad in all but name? Then how does this proposal tie in with the probability that we will intervene with our allies in other parts of Russia to protect our joint interests?'

'Ah, Prime Minister, the idea for a mission was not originally mine.' Surridge paused for. 'I had a visit this morning from the Right Honourable Member for Michelside this morning, one of your chaps.'

'Tarbox? Probably he's got shares in some Birmingham manufacturer which dumps second rate products on the Indian Market and he is worried that trade will be lost to the Russians,' Ballard said before the Prime Minister could reply.

'The Russian threat to India has never gone away. It has merely been hibernating for the last fifteen years. Bears hibernate you know Arthur,' George Merson said with pursed lips.

'Yes, George. But, I was never a believer in the Great Game unlike you. I just do not think a Russian invasion of India is a practicality at this moment in

time. These Bolos may only last as long as Kerensky did.' Ballard replied dryly and then went on, 'I thought we were dealing with the threat of a German or Turkish invasion rather than Russian.'

SurrIDGE began a stabbing motion with the forefinger of his right hand as he went on forcefully. 'This Turkestan issue is not a War Office issue—the India Office is already drafting a proposal.' SurrIDGE looked at Rixon as he added, 'it will not be a proposal to have a jihad.'

Rhys Pugh looked exasperated. 'I thought the discussion on jihad was dead and buried. We are wasting time and I have to go.'

'Just re-iterating a point Prime Minister,' SurrIDGE said testily and exchanged glares with the Prime Minister.

'Thank you, Albert,' Merson said quickly before Rhys Pugh could counter the last statement. 'Any other business?' He beamed at SurrIDGE before he looked round the room and was pleased to see everyone shake their heads. 'Have you anything you need for clarification, Cabinet Secretary?'

'No Lord Merson,' replied Sir John Baxter looking up from his notes. 'I'll have the minutes for you all by this evening. Any items for the agenda for the next meeting please get them to me 24 hours beforehand. Thank you.'

'Then I declare this meeting closed and we'll see you all next week. Thank you, Prime Minister for attending and if I may have a word now with you in your office Prime Minister?'

Rhys Pugh pulled out his watch. 'Time is tight, George. I can give you five minutes in my office if you are quick!' The two men exited the room with Rhys Pugh listening to a tirade of issues pouring from Merson's mouth.

SurrIDGE wanted to be back in the India Office as soon as possible so he could see what Grimes had done. A jihad in Central Asia what a load of nonsense and even more nonsensical suggesting an Arab lead it. All this from the Imperial General Staff which should be dealing only with military matters, no wonder we hadn't won the war yet, SurrIDGE thought shaking his head in bemusement as he stepped out into Downing Street. SurrIDGE got into his car and was whisked the few hundred yards back to the India Office where as soon as he was back at his desk he sent for Grimes.

The following morning after Grimes and SurrIDGE had met again a telegram was despatched from the India Office in London to Simla, the Indian Army Headquarters. The telegram requested that the viability of an intelligence mission to Tashkent in Turkestan be evaluated.

Chapter 6

The door opened and a swarthy Armenian man of not more than four feet eleven inches came into the room. Edrich had inherited Corcorian as an agent from his predecessor, Major Curtis. Corcorian sat facing Edrich panting vigorously yet somehow silently. Edrich waited whilst the other regained his

breath then once he had done so Edrich offered the man a cigarette, which was accepted with alacrity.

Edrich lit the man's cigarette with the home-made cartridge case lighter that his batman, Johnson, had made. Johnson had slipped the lighter into Edrich's pocket as the latter was being hoisted, wounded, onto a stretcher in July 1917. Looking at the lighter he recalled how clever Johnson had been in making things from the debris scattered about the trenches. Edrich started to smile as he thought about the long shell casing the man had fashioned as a potty which protected, using Johnson's euphemistic words, "a man's fishing tackle" from the cold, as he urinated. The smile faded as he remembered that Johnson had been killed whilst Edrich was recovering from his wound back in England.

Looking at the lighter and thinking about Johnson also reminded Edrich that he was lucky, on recovery from his wound that he had not been sent back to fight on the Western or, any other Front. Unbelievably it had taken the army three years to realise that Indian Army officers, like him, were better suited and of more value to the British Empire if they were posted to places like India and Persia. In India and Persia they could use their expert knowledge and practical experience of those countries to good effect rather than act as mere cannon fodder in a flooded trench outside Ypres, or the Somme. He smiled to himself—dry and warm he might be but he was still facing death from his country's enemies.

Corcorian, as he always did, studied the lighter with interest. Edrich would have liked to give the lighter to him but both men knew that such a gift would be dangerous if some of the anti-British locals found Corcorian carrying it. Corcorian put the lighter back on the table and Edrich left it there. Corcorian became a British agent because as an Armenian he hated the Turks, a hatred intensified by the 1915 Armenian massacres that included members of his family. Corcorian knew that keeping a pro-British Government in Teheran was one way to defeat the Turks. Corcorian was also aware of the anti-British political elements in the country's capital and he was gimlet eyed in finding any communications sent to or, received from such people in Shushtar.

Like all British agents Corcorian had a code, MT 35, by which he was both known and addressed. Talking to MT 35 gave Edrich the chance to speak in English. Meetings between the two men had to be as brief as possible otherwise people might ask why the deliverer of telegrams to the British Residence stayed so long.

'Major Edrich, what news from Palestine? The reports I have seen say that a big battle has started and that the Turks are retreating?' Corcorian never ever asked about the war in Europe.

Edrich poured a cup of tea and gave it to Corcorian, 'Yes, MT 35, Johnny Turk is in full retreat and we have taken many prisoners. Soon we will be in Jericho and then on to Damascus.'

'Were there many Turks killed? I hope there were. I'm sorry that you took prisoners. Perhaps you will kill them later?' Corcorian asked hopefully.

Same old comments every time thought Edrich. 'No. I've told you before we don't kill our prisoners. We have rules on how we must treat our prisoners.'

'Rules! Tell that to the Turk! There are never any rules between Armenian and Turks when we fight.' The Armenian thrust his cigarette end into the ashtray on Bill's desk and ground it out viciously. Corcorian looked as if he was about to spit but a glance at Edrich reminded him where he was, so the Armenian refrained. Corcorian lit another cigarette using the cartridge case lighter and asked, 'what about across the river in Mesopotamia?'

'The Turks are beginning to fall back towards Baghdad. It is a race to see whether the British army in Palestine gets to Baghdad first, or whether our army in Mesopotamia gets to Damascus first.'

'No Kut-al-Amara this time?'

'No, I think we learned our lesson about over extending our forces and allowing ourselves to get besieged and starved into defeat like we were then. Meanwhile in northern Persia we have soldiers moving to Enzeli and as we still have Cossacks supporting us, contrary to what has been said by these Bolos, we'll keep driving the Turks back into Turkey. If, or when, the Russians go home to fight in their civil war we will replace them with British soldiers. The Jangali tribe are obstructing our forces advance to the Caspian, possibly with their government in Tehran's connivance, but we'll soon solve that problem and get to Baku.'

'Well the Jangalis are like all the Persian tribes they like their independence. And they won't like the English any better than the Russians as occupiers, will they?' Corcorian accompanied this question by exhaling a smoke ring that both men watched as it gradually dissipated on its way to the ceiling.

'No, I grant you that!' Edrich re-focussed on the Armenian. 'However, we have the Persian best interests at heart; that is something the Russians never had. Also it is in Persia's best interests to have a strong government in Teheran to ensure trade through the Caspian ports is not continually interrupted by bandits. So we must help the Persian government regain control of the area and bring the Jangalis to heel. Once our victory over Turkey is completed Britain will withdraw, naturally.'

'Your presence there has nothing to do with the Germans advancing down towards the Caucasus? Or that Baku as a major oil city is under possible threat?' Corcorian asked pointedly.

'Well, MT35,' said Edrich impressed by the man's knowledge, 'that might have played a very minor part in the decision. Let me assure you,' he added more forcefully, 'that the German is as unpleasant a character as the Turk and more barbarian than the Russian. If they get to the Caucasus mark my word you can forget about Persian neutrality because the Germans will just press on and do what they did to Belgium—invade it.'

'Thank God for the British.' Corcorian saluted with one hand whilst he stubbed out his cigarette in an ashtray with the other. Both men watched in silence as the smoke curled up from the cigarette's embers; abruptly the smoke ceased Edrich stirred himself.

'What information do you have for me, anything on, Bakir Khan? Has he got any telegrams from Teheran?'

'No, nothing has arrived in the Telegraph Office. If they were going to send anything important I doubt it would come that way. A message would go to him

via a courier.' Corcorian put his hand inside his shirt and produced some paper that he handed Edrich, 'the governor got a couple of telegrams, copies for you.'

Edrich would decrypt the telegrams later and then forward the originals to intelligence headquarters down in Basra. 'Have you heard of any trouble brewing here or on the road?' Edrich asked knowing that Corcorian used other Armenians, who traded throughout Persia, as information gatherers.

'I understand that Bakir Khan is behind your intended murder, as you would expect as he is the Lur chief. I get the impression though that the successes you English are having across the border and the fact that British soldiers can be here quicker, because of the new roads, than they could last year are the reasons that stop him from taking any action. I think Bakir knows that if you were to be killed this time he might be hanged rather than some of his men or, alternatively he might be deposed and his brother made chief.'

'Like most chiefs Bakir would not like that,' snapped Edrich.

Corcorian took another cigarette and lit it inhaled heavily and exhaled smoke through his nose. 'No. Also, many of his tribe's people are working on the oil pipeline and earning more money than they have ever done before. I hear that they don't want you murdered because they might lose their jobs in a British reaction.'

'Too much like biting the hands that feed you, eh?' Edrich asked feeling rather relieved. 'So, no other rumours or gossip?'

'No. Perhaps all they are doing, major, with this threat is keep alive the tradition of blood feud. On the other hand perhaps they are merely biding their time. Who knows?' Corcorian looked heavenward as he thought out loud, 'perhaps they'll wait until they think the Germans are returning.'

'Well I assure you, that no Germans will be returning to Persia. As for my murder I intend to keep my wits about me. If you hear anything about my intended demise by rumour or by gossip, I will be most grateful to hear about it,' Edrich smiled, 'preferably before it happens.'

Corcorian laughed, ground his cigarette in the ashtray and stood. It was time to go. Edrich opened the folder where he had stored the telegrams Corcorian had brought and withdrew a book and an envelope. Edrich opened the book and pointing to a place on the page he handed Corcorian an inked pen. Once Corcorian had signed the book Edrich gave him an envelope. Corcorian, with only a cursory glance, emptied the monetary contents first into his hand then into his trousers' pocket. The Armenian then lit yet another cigarette caressed the lighter turned, put it back on the desk before he slipped out of the room. Edrich screwed up the envelope and threw at the waste paper basket where it landed with a pleasant thud.

Chapter 7

Edrich, like all British Political Officers, held meetings with merchants from incoming caravans to discuss their journeys. Such discussions not only kept

the Political Officers abreast of trade between the different commercial centres but it was also a way to discover what the tribes were doing. Banditry on the road was inevitably tribal. The Lurs had been quiet since the hangings in December so no raids had occurred on the Burujird to Dizful road since Edrich's arrival in Shushtar.

Two mornings after Edrich's meeting with Corcorian three merchants came to see him. The merchants had just arrived in a caravan, which had originated in Hamadan and then come via Burujird and Dizful to Shushtar. Edrich was eager to see these merchants because their journey had taken them through Luristan, the Lur homeland. All three were tribesmen, two were Bakhtiari: Abdul Aziz a tea merchant and Parviz Ardillan a wool merchant; Vahid Bihzad who traded in pots and pans was a Lar from Shiraz. Edrich was pleased that none of the three was a Lur so they would not have the disposition to protect anyone from that tribe. After the meeting had been going for an hour and the introductory pleasantries were over Edrich was able to steer the conversation to their recent journey.

'How was the journey from Hamadan?' he began.

Parviz Ardillan looked at the other two and spoke slowly in Persian to Edrich. 'There was snow in the pass before Burujird that slowed us down. We lost a camel that slipped and broke its leg there.'

'It was Allah's will,' said Abdul Aziz and the other two muttered their agreement.

'Did you see any brigands? Anyone try to steal any goods or animals whilst you were in the mountains?'

'No trouble. We saw Captain Yardley with his Indian soldiers, two marches before Burujird.' Parviz almost spat the word 'Indian' but stopped himself because Roy was present. 'Then we saw them again after we left Burujird. They rode with us for a short time on the road to Dizful.'

'There was flooding there in the town and also two marches from the town,' added Aziz sorrowfully. 'It slowed us down and then we lost another animal at the second flood and lost some of its possessions. It was my tea it was carrying.' Aziz looked heartbroken.

'It was Allah's will,' they all said together and Edrich had to stop himself from joining in.

'Have the Lur tribesmen begun to move towards the hills with their animals?' asked Edrich.

'It is spring. They have not yet begun to move but they are preparing to do so,' Vahid spoke slowly and clearly. It was the first time that Edrich had met Vahid and he instantly liked the man's deep voice; a voice Edrich thought would sound wonderful in church.

Edrich took a deliberate sip of his tea and wondered how he was going to frame his next question the one about his perspective murder. Edrich felt that he would ask the question himself rather than get Roy to translate for him. He had just formulated the question in English and was working out the Persian translation when Vahid spoke again.

'There was talk in Burujird about a blood feud with the British Officer in Shushtar.'

'The Lurs are unhappy with the hanging of their tribesman by the last British Officer. They seek revenge.' Aziz interrupted in a barrage of words.

'We saw three Lurs, who were not going to the mountains,' Parviz began then looked at the other two merchants for support and got nods of their heads. Edrich wanted to interrupt the man but managed to stop himself. 'They were coming to Shushtar. We think that they may have something to do with the blood feud.' Parviz again looked at his comrades before continuing, 'we had Lurs with our caravan. They said that the three men sometimes were bandits. They said the three men were in the group that killed men last year in the attack on Shushtar. They also said that they had sworn vengeance on the Ferangi—you, for hanging their tribesmen.'

Edrich waited for Parviz to state where the caravan had seen the three men but he remained silent. Edrich broke the silence. 'And where did you see these three men? Do you know their names?'

All three men shook their heads. 'We saw them only yesterday less than half a day's march to Shushtar when we rode past them. They could already be in the town if they so desired.' Parviz visibly relaxed once he had spoken.

'Thank you for that information. It will be most helpful.' Edrich sipped his tea and offered a cigarette to each merchant. Once they had lit them and were comfortably puffing away. Parviz looked at his companions before he spoke to Edrich.

'Perhaps as the Lurs move to their spring pastures, they might themselves be raided.'

Edrich stopped himself from saying 'By whom?' and realised that Parviz had made a suggestion not asked a question. 'Yes, perhaps they will. Where do you travel to now?'

'We stay here to unload our freight. Then we will pick up new loads. My good friend, Vahid, goes to Shiraz tomorrow. My good friend Parviz goes to Isfahan one day after tomorrow or the next day after that. I will go to Kermanshah soon. It will be summer by the time any of us return here.'

The discussion then moved to trade and what the impact of the events in Russia would have their ability to supply goods to Persia. Edrich pointed out that any invasion by the Turks and Germans from the Caucasus was bound to prevent Persia and Russia from trading. Edrich then assured the merchants that British troops in Northwest Persia would ensure that the roads would be kept open for trade and that British goods would fill any vacuum. The merchants would find that the quality of English goods would be higher than Russian goods. A discussion ensued over the merits and cost of importing goods from England via Basra, rather than from Russia via Enzeli or Tabriz in the north of Persia.

Once the three merchants had left the Residency, Roy arrived in Edrich's office with the day's telegrams from Basra. The first told him that Captain Bartlett would be visiting him with a squadron of troops in two days time. Edrich liked Bartlett and as it had been nearly a month since he had last seen him and a long chat with his countryman was a mouth-watering prospect. As he placed the telegram back on his desk the thought struck him: Was it a normal visit? Or, was it in response to the threat on Edrich life? He was still

pondering that thought when he opened the second telegram envelope he was surprised to find inside a folded piece of paper. Bill unfolded the paper and read, "These are the names of your would-be assassins, Habib Kirmani, Riza Ali Dastgirdi and Issa Bamdad".

'Well done, MT35!' Edrich spoke out loud. Bamdad he knew had a reputation for banditry the others were new to him. He copied the names onto a new sheet of paper in code before he burnt the original list. Edrich then read the telegram from headquarters in Basra requesting that the Shushtar trade statistics be presented in a new format. These statistics included: counting the number of pack animals—camels, donkeys and horses that left from, and arrived in, Shushtar with each caravan; a general list of the goods carried in each caravan and the number of people travelling with the caravan. Roy found the job of gathering the caravan statistics as scintillating as Edrich did when reading them.

'Wonderful news, Roy, Basra has said that we do not have to complete our monthly caravan statistics using that form that you hate so much.' Roy's face broke into a broad smile that disappeared when Edrich added, 'it seems they want all offices to present their statistics in the same way—it's called standardising layouts.'

Roy exhaled in exasperation 'They are bad men down there in Basra, major. Always they make more work for the wicked. When do we start this new process?'

'Monday,' replied Edrich.

'Right,' said Roy perceiving there was something in Edrich's manner that boded ill, 'I suppose you mean this last Monday gone?' when Bill nodded Roy groaned, 'I might have known.'

'It won't be that much more work, will it, Roy?'

'No, major,' Roy grudgingly replied, 'not that much more.'

'I did not call you in just to talk statistics. I think it is time that we visited our friend Mr Ali Ravgani, the Commissioner of Police, again. I would like you to arrange for me to have a meeting with him tomorrow.'

'If he asks me what it is about what shall I tell him?'

'If he asks,' Edrich paused for thought, 'tell him it is a social call. I may wish, Roy, if the opportunity arises to discuss other things.'

'Yes, major. I will do it immediately. I think a social visit is all our Mr Ravgani can manage.'

'One other thing,' Edrich wrote down the names Habib Kirmani and Riza Ali Dastgirdi on a piece of paper and handed to Roy, 'please find out from your records whether we have any information on these two gentlemen as soon as you can.'

Roy returned within the hour and confirmed the meeting with the Commissioner of Police for the following morning. Roy then laid two white cards he had been holding on Edrich's desk. The cards confirmed what Edrich suspected that Habib Kirmani and Riza Ali Dastgirdi were known to have taken part in the uprising in Shushtar the previous November and both men belonged to the Lur band led by Bamdad.

Edrich told Roy they would both go to the telegraph office to send a telegram to Dizful that he had written and enciphered.

To Colonel Smith-Ferryman Commanding Officer 5th Rajput Cavalry,
District Headquarters Dizful
Reference Lieutenant Bartlett's Visit to Shushtar
Colonel

I am under the threat of assassination by Lurs, a blood feud inherited from my predecessor. I think I can avoid assassination by taking precautions, being aggressive or, seeming to be aggressive, in seeking the assassins and keeping the Lurs guessing as to my intentions.

It might be useful if Lieutenant Bartlett either could stay longer and, or, whether on his patrol he could visit the Lur camp if he was not already intending to do so.

William Edrich, Major, Political Officer Shushtar Persia

When Roy and Edrich reached the telegraph office they left two guards outside, the other two guards accompanied the pair to the telegraph counter.

'It will be nice to see Lieutenant Bartlett when he arrives with his troop on his way back to Dizful,' Edrich said in halting Farsi to Roy.

'Lieutenant Bartlett is coming here?' asked Roy in Hindi. Walls have ears he thought. The major had clearly forgotten that.

'Say that again in Farsi, Roy. How can I ever improve if you keep speaking to me in Hindi?'

Roy repeated the question in Farsi all the while looking round to see who could hear. Corcorian could hear and so possibly could the Persian clerk who was sitting at a desk behind the counter. Edrich told Roy not to whisper and then said loudly, as if to make the point, that Lieutenant Bartlett would probably be in town for several days on his way back to Dizful. Edrich added for good measure that the Lieutenant had a bad tooth that was making him very ill tempered. Bartlett's temper was particularly bad when he found tribesman in town who were clearly up to no good and were threatening people when they should be out moving their animals to new pasture. The pair waited until the telegram had been successfully sent before they returned to the Residency this time conversing in Hindi.

Once back at the Residency Edrich asked Roy to tell merchants in the town that extra supplies might, Edrich stressed might, be needed for Bartlett's visit. Edrich hoped the shopkeepers were garrulous and that Lurish ears would be listening. Edrich also hoped that the shopkeepers would not know the Residency was not big enough to accommodate a troop of cavalymen, plus their horses, and that they would have to bivouac outside the town.

Once Roy had left the office, Edrich felt relaxed for the first time. He took a sketchpad and pencil out of his desk drawer and placed them on the desk. He thought for a moment before he got up and moved to the window. Edrich looked out of the window into the courtyard for several moments but nothing inspired him. He turned and let his gaze wander the room before he returned to his desk his mind made up. He stared at the photograph of King George V facing him on

the wall and after gazing at it for several moments he began to sketch his monarch; this time he'd get the eyebrows right or he'd save the Lurs the trouble of killing him, he'd do it himself.

Chapter 8

Simla, India

The Commander-In-Chief Indian Army, General Harris; Colonel Routledge, Indian Army Intelligence; Edward Clarke, from the Government of India's Political Office sat in the general's office to discuss the document the general held his hand and which all three had read.

'Does London know what they are talking about? Is this possible German invasion of India from Russian Turkestan a mountain, a molehill or a wild goose chase—what do you think Routledge?' asked General Harries.

'Actually, sir, I think it could be all three and it's not just the Germans we should be thinking about but the Turks as well.'

Harris pulled a face, 'why include the Turks?'

'Because of what is happening in Russia is to the benefit of both countries.'

'Which invasion threat do you think the more likely?' asked Clarke.

'Can I answer that later?' Routledge replied and when he saw Clarke nod he glanced at the general.

The general thought for the moment, 'I can wait till the end.'

'There are various points I will cover. First, we need to evaluate London's views on the impact of Russia signing a separate peace treaty with the Central Powers. This includes the acquisition of Russian natural resources by the Central Powers. Second, we need to identify from where an invasion of India could be launched—Turkestan or Persia. The information from London's might give us the clue as to their thinking which one of those two are likely. Third, the logistical support required from those launch pads—in particular the transport and the equipment the invasion force will need. Fourth, the impact the invasion force might have on areas and their population through or over which they must travel to India. This includes the strategic reaction of the Russians, Persians and other nations to the invasion forces being on their territory. Fifth and last, what the state of the world war, specifically on the Western Front, is at the time of an invasion launch. Because many of these points overlap there might be some repetition.'

'I don't like repetition so keep it to a minimum if you please colonel.'

'Yes, sir. First, Russia's withdrawal from the war seems to have allowed the Germans and Turks carte blanche to acquire new territory or regain lost lands. London is worried about what the cessation of hostilities has on the Turks and Germans strategic aims which has always included both countries threatening India. The end of the Central Powers—Russia War forces the latter to release all Prisoners of War (POWs). London's says there are 300,000 Central Powers

POWs held in and around Tashkent but they have not told us where they got that figure; Tashkent is the closest place to India where POWs are held. It is understood few if any of those 300,000 are Turks. Turks are held separately from European POWs, well away from areas where the local population is Moslem, as it is round Tashkent. We do not know how many Turkish POWs are held in Russia but we think they are held in Siberia so they are far away from India. Now that the Central Powers and Russia have signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk all POWs will either be repatriated home or, they possibly could be formed into a fighting force to invade India.'

'Second point, is that since the peace treaty both Turkey and Germany have been moving east in particular towards the Caucasus with its oil and other natural resources; both nations are short of those resources which are vital to their war effort. To get to the oilfields both countries have to reach the Caspian Sea and its oil capital and port—Baku. From Baku by boat to the Turkestan port of Krasnovodsk on the Caspian's eastern shore is a hundred ninety miles; Turkestan is where cotton is grown - another vital war resource. Krasnovodsk is on the railway line that runs across Turkistan to Tashkent and the POWs. If Germany reaches the Caspian London thinks they will cross it. London also believes the 300,000, now ex-POWs, will be the troops used to invade India. It does not believe that Germany will send troops from elsewhere because they are needed on the Western front. If the Turks cross the Caspian we believe they will have to find troops from other fronts for an Indian invasion force. The Turkish soldiers will have to come from the Palestine and the Mesopotamia fronts and doing that will expose Turkey's underbelly to our forces fighting there - not something we think Turkey can contemplate.'

'If either country does cross the Caspian then the route to India is wide open despite the distance?' Clarke asked.

'Depends on which place will act as a base for an invasion,' snapped the general, 'which is?'

'Herat or Tashkent,' replied Routledge.

'But Herat is in Afghanistan, colonel, is that likely?' Harris interrupted, 'it might help me if you used a map.'

Routledge got up from his chair and moved towards the wall where a small scale map of India hung permanently to the right of a photograph of King George V. No meeting with the general was ever a success unless he could be shown, pictures, maps and drawings. Routledge hung a large scale map of Central Asia and Northern India over the permanent wall map. Clarke moved his chair slightly to get a better view whilst the general relaxed back into his chair.

'Right sir let me deal with the possible threat from Tashkent first. I have read the cables from London and also Robbins' latest intelligence reports from our listening post in Kashgar, China.' Routledge stood to one side of the map so he could see and address both men. 'It will be difficult for the Germans to supply its soldiers in Tashkent because it is about two and a half thousand miles from Germany,' He coughed into his hand, 'there are two possible supply routes. The first supply route from Germany is via European Russia's port of Astrakhan on the northern Caspian Sea then by ship to Krasnovodsk.'

'How far is that sea voyage?' asked the general.

Routledge flushed because he didn't know exactly, 'I think it's about four or five hundred miles.'

'You ought to know, colonel, facts are important.'

'I will find out the exact distance and the availability of ships. Once the supplies reach Krasnovodsk they can then go by the Turkistan railway to Tashkent. The Bolos would have to allow the Germans use of their railway lines in Europe to reach Astrakhan and in Turkestan to reach Tashkent. The Bolos need that railway themselves to fight their internal opponents, so I doubt that they will willingly allow any German to use of the trains on either line. The alternative supply route from Germany is through the Ukraine or the Danube to the Black Sea. The new Ukraine Government, now independent from Russia and fighting the Bolos, is supportive of the Germans promising them wheat for example. Our Allies, the French, within whose area of responsibility the Ukraine sits, are having problems in finding pro-Allied supporters which might topple the current Ukraine government. The Ukraine's attitude allows Germany direct access to their ports on the Black Sea. That sea is not controlled by the Royal Navy so there is no impediment to the transport of German supplies from the Ukraine or Danube to Turkish ports or more likely to the ports of Georgia and Armenia. Once the Germans have crossed the Black Sea they have to traverse the Caucasus, parts of which are anti-Russian and therefore pro-German, this particularly applies to Georgia. The Georgian railway which the Germans could use does get close to the Caspian. This second supply route for the Germans is also long, tortuous and if its' current allies lose political control of their territories, vulnerable.'

'For the Turks it is just a question of continuing their current land advance to the north and east, from where they are now, and they have no Black Sea to cross to get to the Caspian.' Routledge paused but when neither of the other men said anything, 'the Caspian is the only sea or ocean upon which the Royal Navy has never sailed so we would have no way in stopping any movement by the Germans or Turks on that sea.'

'Perhaps we need to get the Royal Navy involved,' suggested Harris.

'Could we do that?' said Clarke looking at Routledge.

'Possibly, but what could they do?' Routledge grinned, 'they'd have to capture some ships like pirates—shades of Drake and Hawkins.'

'Let us be realistic their methods died long ago. Now what happens when our enemy arrives on Turkestan's shores?' snapped General Harris.

The Bolos, because of their weak political situation, may not be able to prevent the Germans or Turks using the Turkestan rail line. Let us look at the Turkestan railway and see what opportunities it gives the Turks or Germans. The train line starts at Krasnovodsk, goes along the Persian border before it swings north, at the city of Merv, rounds Afghanistan to arrive at Tashkent with its POWs. There are towns on that route which might be useful supply staging posts. Distances from Krasnovodsk: 1100 miles to Tashkent; 900 miles to Samarkand; 360 miles to Ashkhabad; 500 miles to Dushakh; 650 miles to Merv and 760 miles to Herat in Afghanistan. At Merv a secondary line runs about 180 miles south to Kushka on the Afghan border. Kushka to Herat is 70 miles.

Herat is 400 miles from the Indian border and to Quetta for example another 50 miles. We think Herat is the most likely launch pad for an invasion because it is the closest rail point to India. The Germans and Russians discussed using this route to invade India back in 1900 when Russia and we were not allies but Russia and Germany were. Then the Russians thought 200,000 troops would be used for the invasion but the Germans advised them the railway line from Krasnovodsk to Merv needed to be improved to supply that number of troops; we do not know if the line was improved. We know from the fighting in Europe in 1914 that the efficiency of the French railways played an important part in stopping the German advance on Paris and the subsequent Allied victory on the Marne.' He looked down at his notes and continued, 'total distance from the Caspian via Herat to the Indian border is thirteen hundred miles. For the POWs coming from Tashkent via Herat to the Indian border near Quetta the distance is about eleven hundred miles.'

'I wonder how the Emir of Afghanistan would re-act to the Germans' arrival in Herat,' exclaimed the general.

'He's rejected their advances before,' replied Routledge

'They were via a few intelligence agents,' said Clarke, 'this is different. This would be a German army whose head, Kaiser Wilhelm, tells the Muslims he's converted to Islam.'

Harris stroked his chin as he mused, 'just let them try and see how much fun a military involvement, even if they arrive ostensibly as friends, the Germans find in Afghanistan.'

'If the Turks and not the Germans tried to come via Herat they might find being Sunni in a land where many are Shia, is a problem,' volunteered Clarke.

'True, Mr Clarke. It would be a nice change if the Afghans were actively on our side as good Moslems but I wouldn't put a wager on it,' the general spoke and then pointed at Routledge to continue.

Routledge stabbed the map, 'Even if the main line from Krasnovodsk to Merv has been upgraded the spur between Merv to Kushka has not. It is 180 miles between those two towns so the Germans would be taking a major risk to assume it can handle their requirements.' His finger traced the railway line from Europe to Turkestan. His sweaty fingers left a mark on the map that he rubbed off with the back of his hand. 'Sorry,' he said vaguely in the direction of the general before rummaging in his tunic for an unsharpened pencil which he extracted. He had put the pencil in his pocket earlier on in the day precisely for using as a pointing tool. As usual, he had promptly forgotten about as soon as he entered the general's office.

Routledge straightened up and looked at the other two men and after blowing his nose he continued. 'The Civil War which has broken out in Russia must interfere with the railway service making it erratic. Modern warfare, as the present one in Europe has shown us, demands a good rail service for supplies and other support; an unreliable rail service will lead to failure. For both Turks and Germans relying on the Turkistan railway must be a risk. One alternative from relying on the railway for food supplies is to try and live off the land in Turkestan. The land, however, can barely support the indigenous people. Since Turkistan started growing cotton as a cash crop during the last century wheat

has had to be imported from the Ukraine to feed its people. The falling price of cotton, the rise of wheat prices and the instability of wheat supplies from the Ukraine have caused recent uprisings against the Russians over food by the native Moslems. Living off the land will not be possible for the Germans or the Turks. Even if it was possible we believe the Germans will be seen not as saviours but as just another set of hungry infidels by the indigenous peoples.'

The general's eyes were glazing over indicating his mind had begun to wander, then asked abruptly, 'the what?'

'The various local Turkic tribes, sir.' Routledge noted that the eyes general's eyes that had been glazing over were coming back into focus; he waited till he thought the general was back in the land of the awake. 'Next,' Routledge had lost count of where he was, 'the Germans have the alternative to launch an army from Tashkent. The army would go directly south from Tashkent through the mountains to the Indian border a distance of fifteen hundred miles.' Routledge paused and walked back to the desk and picked some papers up and waved them in the air. 'I have been re-reading some of the Pundit reports, from the last century, about their travels up in the Pamirs, the Hindu Kush and the Karakoram across which the German invasion force would come. The Pundits had to cross passes not one of which was less than ten thousand feet hard enough for those fit men. To cross those mountains an army needs horses, camels, mules, donkeys and yaks because motor transport needs metalled roads which don't exist. To build those roads would take the German's years and the war I'm sure will be over by then. How can an army of half-starved prisoners of war come over those types of places and then attack us?' Routledge shook his head, 'it is not possible for these men.'

'Those distances make it sound improbable but not impossible, colonel, but what about German artillery? Heavy guns could sway the invasion,' General Harris volunteered, 'remember we haven't got any big guns they're all elsewhere.'

'How would the Germans know that?' Routledge replied, 'they couldn't take the chance that we haven't got heavy weapons. Using trains to carry heavy weapons is fine but there is the transport they need once they have to leave the railway.' Routledge tossed the pencil into the air and nearly dropped it. 'The Germans then have to get the guns to whichever part of the Indian border they have chosen. Either route they choose is over rugged terrain, whether desert or mountain or both; that means using pack animals because there are no suitable roads for motor vehicles. Pack animals could probably only carry light artillery over the long distances and poor roads they would have to travel to get to India. So the invasion force is very unlikely to have the heavy weapons it needs.' Routledge juggled the pencil in his hand which made Clarke smile but Harries looked disconcertingly at Routledge who put the pencil in his pocket.

'How many animals does one need to carry the light artillery, ammunition, the men, food and water for both men and animals?' asked Clarke.

'Thirty thousand minimum, fifty thousand is the more likely figure because one can expect high animal wastage when crossing the mountains or desert. My sources say there are not that many animals available in Turkestan, or

anywhere else for that matter, that the Germans or Turks can get their hands on.'

'The tribes in Turkestan have horses and camels, don't they, Routledge?'

'They have, general, but I am not sure they will make them readily available to the Germans. These people, as you know, measure wealth by the numbers of animals they own rather than in gold or money in the bank; they will not want to sell them.'

'The Germans might just take them, Colonel Routledge. That is their style after all,' grunted Harris.

Clarke who thought he ought to say something uttered, 'it is.'

'If they do that they would make enemies of the locals. The German have a long supply line whichever way they come,' Routledge removed the pencil from his pocket and hit the map with a smack. He had intended to point to Turkestan but instead it landed in the Indian Ocean south of Karachi. Quickly Routledge moved the pencil back up to Tashkent and did a drawing motion down to India and back again next his pencil followed the railway line across to the Caspian from Tashkent. 'Unfriendly locals are likely to attack that supply line. Once the locals start doing that then the Hun or Turk needs more troops and more animals to act as guards along that route,' he paused for effect, 'and the guards in turn would need more supplies.' He paused to watch the general thinking.

'What troop numbers do the Germans need for an invasion, bearing in mind we have few soldiers to oppose them,' asked the general.

'They would need a force of at least ten thousand first-class troops for the invasion. Those ten thousand in turn would need support soldiers, say,' Routledge waved his hands, 'five thousand, to man posts along the way for protection, building and repairing any roads and other duties.'

'London says there are three hundred thousand men in Turkestan why only use ten thousand?' The general was now listening hard.

'Well I think ten thousand is the absolute minimum they could use and more importantly supply at the moment. All the troops they have in Tashkent,' he tapped the map again with his pencil and added, 'are ex-POWs and therefore they will be rusty, under trained and undernourished. Hardly can they be described as first class soldiers and you would need fit soldiers for an invasion remembering they have to come hundreds of miles to India whether they come via Tashkent or Herat.'

Harris got up and went and stared at the map. 'I agree that they can't be first class soldiers, Colonel Routledge, otherwise they wouldn't have been captured would they?'

Routledge thought about this for a moment and whilst he could not agree with the general's he replied. 'No sir—quite right sir. We understand that apparently the prisoners are mainly Austrians rather than Huns. The Russians performed better against the Austrians than they did against the Germans so they captured more prisoners from the Empire. Also as the Russians did better early in the war many of the prisoners have been in captivity for a long time which further supports what you just said about their quality and fitness for service. October 1917 is probably when the last prisoners were captured by the

Russians because since December 1917 there was an armistice between them and the Central Powers prior to the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. That is a long time to be away from army discipline and all other military matters,' he uttered staring over the general's head.

The general thought Routledge was in better form than usual, pity his tie wasn't quite straight.

Routledge re-focused, 'another thing. Many of these so-called Austrians are not Austrians at all but Czechs, Hungarians, Slavs and many are anti-German or anti-Austrian. Indeed we know that Czechs POWs from the Austrian Empire who were held in European Russia have been released, changed sides and as a Czech Army they are already on their way out of Russia to fight with us against the Germans on the Western Front.' Routledge hammered the map again with his pencil, 'I think only German troops will be used for any invasion. I have estimated that only about twenty thousand to twenty five thousand of the prisoners in Turkestan are German.'

'How do you come to those figures Colonel Routledge?' Exclaimed the general.

'Through me,' volunteered Clarke, 'it seems the Danes and the Swedes are managing the return of POWs to their home countries. I was talking to one of the Swedish diplomats at a function a few days ago who told me the number of POWs in Tashkent and its surrounding areas is in the low tens of thousands. When I told him I believed they were in the hundreds of thousands he replied that was a ridiculous figure and what he told me based on what the Danes and Swedes had found in Turkestan. He said all POWs were living in poor conditions. Though he couldn't tell me the number of German POWs he said they were a very low percentage of the total number of POWs being held.' Clarke looked across at Routledge.

Routledge began, 'Only a small percentage of fit men would be available to the Germans immediately, the others will need time to re-cooperate and be trained. London's figures seem wildly exaggerated and if that is correct this invasion is not going to happen for the foreseeable future and not using German POWs from Tashkent. I thought it best to be cautious and work out the minimum soldiers an invasion required and speculated that only half the German POWs would be able to fight. Still we must know the actual German POW numbers in Tashkent to prove the politicians' figures from London wrong.'

'The Frocks trying to frighten the army or just getting their facts wrong?' said Harris.

Routledge felt he need not answer the general's speculation and after a quick glance at his notes. 'Finally, I assume the Germans need to win the war quickly because the Allies have held their recent attacks on the Western Front and by doing so caused them heavy casualties that we believe they cannot afford. That being the case perhaps the POWs will be shipped west to fight in Europe rather than be used to threaten India.' Routledge stood straight and put his hands behind his back and waited.

'You said the Germans would have to move quickly - why do you think that colonel?' Harris asked chin in his hands as he stared intently at the map with its many indentations scattered from the Caspian Sea to the Gulf of Bengal.

'America will be moving large numbers of soldiers to the Western Front this year, more next year. The sheer numbers of these Americans everyone is sure will be decisive in the Allies winning the war.'

'Americans, eh. Don't know much about them myself. Do you Clarke?'

'Not much, sir. At least they speak English. Big Fellows I understand.'

'That does not mean they can fight, or on the other hand it doesn't mean they can't fight.' Harries said philosophically.

'No, sir,' said Clarke and Routledge together.

The general grunted at the map and sat back with his hands behind his head. He sat like that for a moment then moved his hands onto the arms of his chair and looked at Routledge. Routledge waited for comment but the general and Clarke said nothing but looked at him expectantly. Routledge jabbed his pencil at Tashkent and Herat and hoped he was going to sound forthright and confident.

'So to sum up, sir, I don't think either country can transport sufficient troops or supplies by train. I do not think that there are sufficient animals available to them for their other transportation requirements and if they take them there will be trouble with the locals. They haven't got the right troops because they can only use Germans POWs as the Austrian Empire's soldiers do not appear to be of the right quality and some Empire soldiers won't fight again with the Germans. We don't actually believe there are enough German POWs in Tashkent so they'd have to get soldiers from Europe—that supply is unlikely. Then the mountains are too high, the desert too dry, the distances too long for even a small force to get to India in the current environment. Something we really don't know is—what the Russians intentions are about the Germans and whether they really want them wandering through the country. I doubt that they do and if that is correct then the Germans and the Russians might end up fighting one another. Therefore I do not believe that an invasion from Russian Turkestan by the Germans is feasible.' He paused, 'that is the mountain.'

Routledge walked in front of the map and pointed at Persia. 'An invasion from Persia is an alternative,' and jabbed his finger on Tehran.

'You have forgotten Turkey invading from Turkistan,' Harris said frowning.

'I'd like to say something on that before the colonel,' interrupted Clarke. 'The political view is that Turkey and Germany might clash over Baku oil and trade in general. Germany is the main supplier of Turkey's military hardware and we on the political side think they will somehow find a way not to supply them if there are problems between them over Baku. The Turks move slowly and they are not efficient in their organisation and therefore we think if they threaten India they have the same supply issues as the Germans along the Turkestan railway as well as getting equipment from Germany. The Turks however do have another route available to them which might be an easier supply route than crossing the Caspian from Baku—namely through Persia.' Clarke motioned to Routledge to continue.

'Why would or could the Turks come through Persia to India?' Nobody stirred so Routledge answered his own question. 'Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, has population of about a quarter of a million. The town's population is 60-70% Christian that includes Armenians, Ukrainians, Georgians and Russians;

Christians manage the oil industry. Moslem Azeris who make up about 20-25% of the town's community do the manual work. However, Azeris make up about 75% of Azerbaijan's total population which includes other Moslems: Tartars; Kurds; Talysh; Lezgins and Tats. So Baku is a Christian enclave enclosed by Moslems. Baku is politically controlled by the Bolos but we have no idea how strong their grip is on power. What nationalities make up this Baku Soviet government is important because if it contains few Moslems it may just be seen as Russian oppression using a different name. The Bolos must hang onto Baku because of its oil not just for their own requirements but to export and earn money. Turkey and the Russians have been fighting each other,' he spread his hands, 'what for, two, three, four hundred years? So will the Bolos want the Turks in Azerbaijan? No. But as the Bolos have not been consistent in obstructing the German and Turk armies in other areas, what will they do?'

Routledge again paused but was asked nothing so added, 'Moslem and Christian have a history of violence against one another in the Caucuses. Earlier this year there were massacres of Baku Azeris by Armenians. The former are looking to the Turks for help in the form of arms so that they can revenge themselves on the Armenians. We think the Turks are supplying and recruiting large numbers of the Azeris for an assault on Baku. The Turks are more likely to get to Baku first because of the shortness of their supply lines compared to the Germans and the support they will get from the local Muslim population. So the likelihood of Baku falling to the Turks is high. We know from our headquarters in Baghdad that General Muncerville's Muncerforce will be attempting to support the anti-Turkish locals in Baku against the advancing Turks but Muncerforce has only a few hundred men against the several divisions the Turks have in the area. There is the possibility that the Bolos will send soldiers to Baku from Astrakhan to oppose the Turks but we must know more about Bolo intentions—then I would be happier. We need accurate information on both the political and the military situations in Baku so we can take the correct action.'

'Baku's capture would be a huge prestige gain for either Turk, or German as well as solving their oil needs and that would prolong the war,' suggested Clarke.

'Not something any of us want and so whatever we can do from here we must do,' said the general. 'Continue, Colonel Routledge.'

Routledge paused to wipe his brow with a handkerchief and stuffed it into his pocket and when he saw the general looking at him he patted the bulge and quickly continued, 'whilst many of the Turkestan tribes belong to the same ethnic group and speak the basic language as the Ottoman Turks that does not mean they all support the Turks. The Turks will be seen as saviours by the Azeris but if they moved across to Turkistan they might find less friendly Turkic peoples—conservative religious Moslems like the Emir of Bokhara see the Turks as too influenced by the infidel west and oppose what they stand for. Whether that Emir would actually fight the Turks is difficult to judge. Finally, if the Sunni Turks were to reach our North-West frontier, where the tribesmen are mainly Shia, they might not get the support they might expect from their coreligionists.'

'Somehow we got onto Turkestan again when I thought you were dealing with Persia,' stated General Harris.

'Persia itself contains Turkic tribesmen mainly in the north-west of the country. Possibly as many as 20% of the total population of Persia may be Turkic and they might support the Turks because of their ethnicity. Since the beginning of the war some non-Turkic Persians have been, and are continuing, to support the Germans against us but they are not supporters of the Turks. The Turks are a bigger threat to Persia than the Germans.' Routledge removed his handkerchief and patted his face.

'Why? And stop dithering about with that handkerchief Routledge.'

Clarke intervened, 'history and geography general. Turkey has won and lost territory to Persia before, Persia is weak, so this may be an opportunity for the Turks to seize more land and threaten our Persian oil interest further south in the country,' he stopped for Routledge to continue.

'The current Turkish armies' progress east leads into that part of Persia once defended by a Russian Cossack force which is slowly withdrawing back to Russia as their numbers dwindle and their supplies dry up. The route the Turks are taking following those Cossacks leads directly via the State of Azerbaijan into Persia. The Turkic tribes who live in Persia round the southern Caspian coast opposed the Russians when they occupied Northern Persia before the war and though Shia rather than Sunni they are supporting their ethnic brother's invasion. We believe the Turkish army has already arrived at Tabriz in Persia. If the local tribes continue to support a further Turkish advance into Persia then the latter can gain access to the Northern Persian port of Enzeli which is only 300 miles from Tabriz. Enzeli to Baku is 360 miles and not much further to Krasnovodsk.'

Clarke looked at the general who now leaned forward and was staring at the map. 'So how would the Turks come to India, Routledge? What you have just been saying indicates that you were going to talk about that railway line again,' the general looked puzzled. 'I thought we were talking about an invasion from Persia.'

'Yes but their ideal route would still be across the Caspian but from Enzeli which is closer to Turkey than Baku and shortens supply lines. Now once at Krasnovodsk.'

General Harris interrupted 'we are back to the same train line again. I did ask you not to repeat yourself, colonel.'

'I know general but this is different. I think the Turks will detrain at Ashkhabad not go another 300 miles to Merv. They would then cross the Persian border at Kuchan before continuing on to Meshed.' Routledge hit the map hard, 'once at Meshed they can launch their Indian invasion across the desert so water would be a problem along with all the other supply problems: animals, arms, food etc.'

'So why wouldn't the Turks come through Herat like you suggested the Germans would?' said the general.

Clarke stirred himself again, 'I think this is more a political than military issue. The further east one goes in Turkestan the more conservative the local religious and political leaders are. The Emir of Bokhara opposed the 1908

revolution of the Young Turks in Turkey—because it was thought to be Un-Islamic and of course it restricted the Sultan's role in the country. No hereditary political leader, like the Emir, likes to see a fellow hereditary political leader lose their powers or have them restricted. Western Turkistan has a small population which is less religious than the population found further east in Turkestan and has no hereditary leader to lead any opposition to the Turks. The Turks therefore will avoid any potential problems with the Emir by entering Persia at Kuchan a widely used crossing point from Turkistan. I must remind the general that the Russian troops who were at Meshed and whose purpose was to stop, as they did earlier in the war, any German or Turkish secret agents getting to Afghanistan or India through that city have withdrawn back to Russia. Their disappearance has left a gaping hole at Meshed through which an invasion force could pour towards India.'

'Thank you, Clarke,' said Routledge glad for the respite. 'We need soldiers fulfilling the role that Muncerforce is intended to play on the Caspian—if we can find any men left here.'

Harris laughed, 'timing is everything, Colonel Routledge. I have received today, just before our meeting, a directive from the War Office that a small force of our Indian troops must be sent to Meshed and that a senior officer, Brigadier General Barber, is to be in charge of that mission. The purpose of the mission is to do what we just suggested plug the hole immediately.'

'These troops ordered to Meshed,' Routledge sounded aggrieved as he added 'shouldn't we have decided that?'

'Yes,' Harris waved the paper, 'look the War Office has to make some decisions on the hoof.' He put the paper down on the desk and leaned forward, 'I'm glad those in far off London acted quickly and I'm glad that they recognise the importance of Meshed and the need for a senior officer to be in charge there. General Barber is ideal for the post because as you know he has wide experience but it will take time for him to get here from Basra. General Barber will report to us in India not to the Mesopotamia Command, which avoids any friction between us and the Basra headquarters. Colonel Statham remains in charge of intelligence operations at Meshed and Brigadier Fishlock is to be acting military commander there. Now, what London has asked us to do is to provide officers to support the mission in its intelligence activities. There's a nice headache for you both.'

'Thank you sir,' Clarke and Routledge said in unison as they both wondered how they were going to find relevant officers when thanks to the war they were in short supply.

'Any questions?' Harris asked. The two men shook their heads. 'Going back to the current Persian Government they are favourable to us unlike the lot they had in last year, Clarke, am I right?'

'Yes they are. It has apparently cost us a lot of money and effort to get the current pro-British leader into power. But, if our chap gets turfed out his replacement could side with the Huns again—though neutrality may be seen as Persia's best policy. Of course,' he added grinning, 'if the Persians did go over to the Germans then we could always stir up the tribes just like the Germans did

against us until last year. The Persian tribes never like whichever government is in power in Teheran. It would be a piece of cake to stir them up.'

'The biter bit,' smiled Routledge.

'Colonel Routledge, why won't the Turks or Germans go through Persia to India?' Asked Clarke.

General Harris spoke out. 'I can answer that. They have: no railway and no roads to move large bodies of men; little water and if they tried to live off the land they'd have trouble with the tribes. I know I've been there.' He paused and after a few seconds he looked at his watch then at the colonel.

'I agree with the general that any threat will not come that way in this war.' Routledge moved the blunt side of the pencil from Russia through Persia to the Indian border before he put his pencil back into his pocket.

The general leaned back in his chair nodding his head in appreciation at Routledge's presentation. 'Sit down, Routledge, don't worry about the map.' The general waited until Routledge had sat down before saying, 'so, this threat to invade India is non-existent but London says we must have people in Meshed so we will.' Harris, eyebrows raised, 'anything else?'

'One thing we have not mentioned this morning is Indian subversives. These Bolos seem to want to export their revolution and use such Indians to sell their message. Could the subversives be smuggled to India via Meshed or Tashkent?' suggested Routledge.

Clarke spoke slowly feeling for his words. 'It is possible but again whilst we in the Political Office have heard nothing specific. There are rumours that people will be trying to infiltrate our borders from Russia because these Bolos are revolutionaries and against all empires. We do have a bit of good news. Robbins, our chap in the Kashgar Mission in Chinese Turkestan, is retiring next month and will have to be replaced. He has requested in his latest report that he would like to return home through Russia visiting Tashkent en route. This visit he says will give him the chance to find out for us exactly what the political situation is in Tashkent.'

'London knows about this request, Clarke?'

'The request came in yesterday from Kashgar, general, so it has only gone off to London this morning.'

Routledge butted in, 'We must support Robbins' request so he can find out exactly how many German prisoners there are, their physical fitness, their state of mind and anything else relevant about them or the Austro-Hungarian POWs.'

'Yes,' snapped the general, 'we cannot rely on foreigners like the Swedes and Danes to give us exact information. We must remember the Swedes in this war are pro-German. The India Office's intention for this mission is primarily political now by chance that can be led by Robbins. What the Indian army needs is military information that Robbins, being a civilian, cannot evaluate. To get that military material we need a military officer or officers to join Robbins' proposed mission.'

'You think the Russians would welcome British military officers in Tashkent?' Clarke asked amazed.

'No, not put as baldly as that. By telling the Bolos that all we are doing is monitoring the Central Powers prisoners and their repatriation home,' suggested Routledge, 'they may tolerate the mission.'

Clarke responded, 'what we need to know on the political side is what the people are like who are running the area's government and their attitudes to: the Turks and the Germans moving east into Russian territory; allowing the POWs to become an Indian invasion force; sending the POWs home or recruiting them to the Bolo army; Indian Nationalists. We must also know if Germany is trying to buy cotton and whether the Bolos will sell it to them? Of course,' Clarke added, 'the current Bolo government may have disappeared by the time our mission gets there.'

The general exhaled loudly and looked the floor. After a few seconds he raised his head. 'Military and political people working together seems sensible to me, eh Routledge?'

Routledge nodded his head vigorously, 'I think it's one of your best ideas, sir.' Clarke wanted to laugh but controlled himself.

'So to sum up from what has been said. It is unlikely that the Germans could invade us but this proposed mission sounds like an insurance policy against that happening. The mission gives us the benefits of political and military intelligence. I'll propose this as my idea to the viceroy and London which will guarantee it will happen. Anything else?' Harris looked and sounded like he did not want anything else—but he was out of luck.

'Yes, sir,' Clarke sounded angry, 'I gather from London that the War Office, with probable Foreign Office support, originally proposed a similar mission to be run using Arabs—unbelievable. This part of Russia is in our sphere of influence and responsibility not the Foreign Office. Neither the Government of India nor the India Office wants the Foreign Office meddling here. Look at the mistake they have made in Arabia supporting the Sheriff of Mecca instead of our chap Ibn-Saud. Look at the mess they got us into when they sent us those two dreadful men to Kut. I think we should protest to the India Office and that they do something about it.'

'Herbert and Lawrence, typical Foreign Office wallahs—know it all. Well they thought they did—idiots.' Routledge interjected angrily.

'Yes,' said Clarke animatedly, 'sent to arrange the bribery of the Commander of the Turkish forces besieging Kut-al-Mara in Mesopotamia! Well they certainly failed in that. They treated all our people as though they were idiots, and generally made themselves as unwelcome as possible. If that is the standard of the people in the Foreign Office then we must keep the blighters out.'

'They were map drawers in Cairo—couple of academics types. Apparently, they had no military knowledge and as someone said about them "Give them a Mills bomb and they would extract the pin, throw that at the enemy and keep the bomb. Hopeless, hopeless, hopeless.'

The general nodded slowly, 'I agree with your sentiments but we have to be careful, Clarke. I think we have quite enough to do without antagonising the Foreign Office. How many army officers would we send to Tashkent?'

Routledge looked at Clarke as he replied to the general. 'Two should be enough, sir.'

Clarke then said, 'Yes, we will also be finding the replacement officer for Robbins from our Political Department. I think the chap who is replacing Robbins should go to Kashgar at the same time as the mission's army officers. I think that will help the new chap in any liaison he may have to have with the mission once it's in Russia. Also I was thinking it might be prudent to send as Robbins' replacement someone who has a strong military and political background because this mission is covering both. Many of our political officers were originally soldiers so military awareness ought not to be a problem but both officers on the mission must speak Russian.'

'You chaps decide who the officers should be. The rest is detail.' said the general dismissively.

'Of course we will need Chinese and the Amir of Afghanistan's approval, sir for this mission.' Clarke added empathetically, 'still that's a job for London.'

'It is. All we should be doing is winning the war in Mesopotamia and keeping the damn Pathans quiet,' the general growled. 'When could our chaps go off?'

'Probably another month or so when the mountain passes are open,' Routledge replied after a pause for reflection.

'Finalise your plans then come and see me again with a document to sign.' The general dismissed the two men.

Clarke and Routledge agreed to meet the following day to discuss the Missions whilst in the interim they and their staff researched potential candidates. Clarke found as he began to trawl through his files many of the people serving as Political Officers had returned to their regiments at the outbreak of the war in 1914. These men were now soldiering in Mesopotamia, the Middle East, Italy, Salonika, and the Western Front. As he looked at the names on the files Clarke was sadly reminded that so many officers, whom he had known personally and would be ideal for the role required, were casualties and he would never see them again.

On the day when Routledge and Clarke met to look at the names they had come up with they decided they needed a set of rules to help them choose. These rules included: the time taken to recall an officer to Simla for briefing must be less than the six weeks because the mission was expected to leave by then. This rule meant anyone actually fighting in Europe or the Middle East was ruled out because it would take too long to get an officer transferred to India and for the latter to send his replacement. The Political Office said the person replacing Robbins at Kashgar ought to hold a military rank of lieutenant colonel or above—for status purposes. Therefore the man selected should either be a lieutenant colonel already or be a senior major due for a promotion. The man who was to lead the military side must be minimally a major.

The most obvious person to replace Robbins was a Major Sennett then serving on the Northwest frontier. Sennett was the obvious choice because the man spoke Russian and Chinese and was currently serving in India. Sennett was also a senior major and therefore a promotion for him would not cause any problems. A request was sent to Sennett's commanding officer in Peshawar asking the major if he would accept the Kashgar post.

Major Washbrook and Captain Hutton were selected as the officers to represent the military side of mission as they had both travelled to Russia,

before the war, and spoke Russian. Washbrook was currently serving near the Khyber Pass whilst Hutton was recovering from injuries sustained in an aircraft crash and was therefore not currently employed. A telegram was sent to Washbrook's commanding officer requesting his release for the mission. Another telegram was sent to Hutton asking him whether he was still injured or whether he was now fit for duty.

Whilst the selection of the Tashkent mission members was going ahead reports were also being received from various north-east Persian towns that German and Turkish agents were arriving and becoming active in anti-Allied propaganda. Routledge and Clarke therefore had to find another two officers to go to Meshed. Captains Fernee and Mawle currently working in the Intelligence Department at Indian army headquarters in Delhi were the ones selected.

Captain Fernee was a temporary officer of the Indian Frontier Field Force and had all the credentials necessary for such an operation. Fernee had worked before the war as an undercover policeman on the Indian frontier ferreting out undesirables and opponents of Britain's rule of India; he had worked in Persia earlier in the war as an intelligence officer. One of his roles in Persia had been in the successful tracking down and capture of Wasserstein, the German agent. Wasserstein had led the British a merry dance in the first two years of the war as he led various Persian nomad tribes in their revolt against British rule in their country. Fernee spoke not only several Indian languages but also Russian and German which might be useful if any agent from either of the latter countries attempted to cross Persia en route for India or Afghanistan. Captain Mawle was new to India having only just arrived from working in the War Office's Intelligence Department in London. Sending Mawle to Meshed meant Simla could keep a more experienced man in their office.

Chapter 9

On their way to see Ravgani, the Police Commissioner the pair had their normal banter about the man; Roy said that the man was indolent Edrich felt the man to be merely incompetent. Indolence, Edrich claimed was always accompanied by fatness in the individual concerned and Ravgani was as thin as a rake so he could not be indolent. Roy argued that indolence and fatness did not go hand in glove and that the only reason that Ravgani was not fat was that he must have a tapeworm. Edrich countered that tapeworms were invariably, in his experience, caused by eating pork and as a Muslim Ravgani did not eat pork hence he couldn't have a tapeworm. Roy was caught out by this and had not thought of an answer before they were ushered into the Police Commissioner's presence.

Edrich opened the conversation once he felt the ritual pleasantries were concluded. 'I have discussed with the governor matters that could concern your police.'

Ravgani looked vague and shifted his sitting position as though this gave him time to think—not a common occurrence. ‘What police matters were discussed?’

‘Well it seems that there are three Lur tribesmen whose task is to kill me.’

Ravgani nodded his head. ‘I met with the governor recently and he mentioned you.’ Ravgani looked off into space as he concentrated on what he was going to say, ‘and that you were involved in a feud.’

‘Yes something I have inherited from my predecessor.’

Ravgani stared off into the distance, ‘Major Titmus. I remember him.’

He only left a couple of months ago hardly surprising you remember him, thought Edrich as he said, ‘I have the names of the Lurs who are suspected of planning to kill me. Possibly, they match the names you have?’

The Persian again did not answer immediately and appeared to be thinking. The droning of a fly was distinctly audible in the silence of the room. Ravgani looked warily at Edrich when he spoke, ‘no, I do not know who they are. If I did would you want me to arrest these men before they kill you?’

‘That would be most helpful,’ said Edrich mystified by the other’s response but trying not to show emotion.

‘I think it will be difficult for me to arrest them unless they have done something.’

‘Well, Commissioner, naturally I would want to see them perhaps frightened off before they committed my murder.’

‘Yes,’ Ravgani looked serious, ‘I do not wish to see my good friend, Major Edrich, killed but if I do not know the names of these men. I?’ Ravgani shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

‘May I make a suggestion?’

‘Yes,’ said Ravgani very slowly. This sounded like work.

‘I have these names of Lurs who are known, in the past, to have been involved in banditry, attacks on caravans, shooting at patrols, all that sort of thing. Now I do not say that the names I have are the ones involved in my threatened murder. But we have to start somewhere do we not?’ Edrich went on after hesitating to see if Ravgani wanted to reply; he didn’t. ‘Of course we do. So if I give you these men’s names perhaps you could get your men to visit all the inns in the city to see whether they have already arrived in Shushtar and are staying here. If any of them are here in the town then we can ask them why they are here and that we will, sorry you will, be keeping an eye on them.’

Ravgani felt depressed at the thought of work. ‘If these Lurs are dangerous then it will hard for me to send my men out for such work when the government has not paid them for months. My men may feel that this is between the British and the Lurs and that it is none of our police business, it is political.’

‘Murder whether political or not surely is police business?’

‘Yes, well, it is,’ Ravgani’s voice trailed off whilst his eyes avoided Roy and Edrich.

Roy looked at Edrich who held his finger to his lips; the silence filled the room. When Ravgani’s eyes focussed back on Edrich, the latter spoke, ‘when I came to visit you today I was accompanied by some of my soldiers. Now I was thinking that on our way back to the Residency there are two inns that we

could investigate for you. We could just chat to each innkeeper to find out if he has seen these Lurs, whether they are staying with him or whether he knows if they are in town. I was thinking if I did that, it would allow your men to get on with their other work.' Edrich sneaked a look at Roy whose eyes were boggling at him.

Ravgani looked of unhappy at that suggestion. 'It may cause me trouble if we have Indian soldiers searching our Inns.'

'No, no, no, Commissioner we would not search the inn, or create a commotion merely I'd ask if these men were staying there. If these Lurs are there I'll invite them to have a chat to me about their reason for being in town. They are unlikely to cause trouble if I catch them unawares and my escort will be outside the inn waiting for me.'

'If they are there and do not wish to speak to you?'

'All I will do is, send you a message stating that fact. If you wish you can get your men to go and talk to them and see what, if anything, they are up to.'

Ravgani looked visibly relieved. 'The Indian soldiers won't go into the inn?'

'No, they will be under strict orders not to enter the inn, unless someone takes a shot at me,' Edrich added casually. 'Then my men will have to go in and arrest them for you, Commissioner. I am sure you would be happy for them to do that.'

'Yes, Major Edrich, I think I would welcome your help on this matter, but only the two inns. Now you have some names?'

Edrich passed the list of Lur names to Ravgani who scanned them briefly then looked up, 'these might be the same three names his Excellency gave me the other day.'

Edrich pondered the governor's last statement. Three names surely he would have remembered that few but there was no point in getting angry at the man opposite. 'Ah, I thought his Excellency might have done that. With the amount of work you must do it must be difficult to keep on top of things. I am sure his Excellency the Governor would be pleased to reward you and your men if somehow the three were to be detained before my death. I don't know but I think my government would hold the governor responsible if I was to be killed. Who knows what the governor would do then,' Edrich's voice trailed off.

It was impossible to know by looking at him whether it was the sound of possible gain or blame that galvanised Ravgani into staring at the Lur names on the list as if he was trying to memorize them. Ravgani then tried to return the list to Edrich but when he was told he could keep the list he reluctantly placed it in front of him. Edrich visibly relaxed and the next half an hour passed slowly by as he reiterated once again for the benefit of the commissioner how well the allies were doing in France, Palestine and Mesopotamia.

Roy was bursting to ask Edrich a question and as soon as the pair had left Ravgani he said, 'Major, do you really think that the men who are trying to kill you would stay in one of the inns we are going to? Surely, they would stay with one of their many tribesmen who now live in the city, or at least an inn run by Lurs. The two we are going to are both run by Bakhtiaris?'

'I think you are undoubtedly right, Roy. But we have to start somewhere, don't we? Yes, it is extremely unlikely that Lurs would stay at an inn run by

Bakhtiaris but by going somewhere where they are unlikely to be means I will not be shot at—something dear to my heart. Also let me ask you this, what do you know about inns?’

Roy furrowed his brow, ‘They are places one stays in, where one meets and chats to lots of people from different places. They are usually filthy places fit only for tribesmen. Won’t it frighten the Lurs off before we can catch them if we start looking for them in the city’s inns?’

‘I will not lose any sleep if that happens, Roy.’

‘Ah, I see. It lets the Lurs know that we are onto them, major, doesn’t it? Provided that the men named by the governor are the actual ones after you.’ He paused and looked at Edrich knowingly, ‘the hunter now becomes the hunted.’

‘There you have it. Another expression we use in English would also fit the situation, “the biter bit”.’

‘I wouldn’t want to bite a Lur, major, I don’t eat meat.’

Edrich stopped and looked at Roy, ‘I’m hungry so let’s go find a Lur and who knows how he might be in a curry sauce.’ Roy made a face of mock disgust and they both laughed.

Most Shushtar houses had cellars that were used for relaxation or entertainment in the hot weather. Edrich and Roy had agreed a plan of campaign that the former would enter an inn on his own but that he would not go down to the cellar where as an honoured guest he was bound to be invited. Cellars, whilst cool, were too good a place for an ambush. Edrich anyway was wary of Persian inns, as he had been told provided that they harboured the typhus bug; though whether the bug was happier above or below ground he wasn’t sure. He decided based on no scientific evidence whatsoever that the disease would exist better in the less aerated cellar.

Yusaf Bahadur was the innkeeper of the first inn they visited and true to form he invited Edrich to sit in the cellar. Edrich declined the invitation telling Yusaf that a horse had trod on his leg so climbing stairs was difficult for the moment. As Edrich stood in a room leading off the courtyard talking to Yusaf he kept his back firmly against the wall. Edrich made a great play of keeping his eyes roving round the room. Eventually when he felt he had discussed the weather, trade, and caravans Edrich asked him whether any Lurs were staying with him. As expected Yusaf replied in the negative but Yusaf promised that if any did come to stay, particularly the three whose names Edrich mentioned, he would personally tell the consul. Edrich smiled when he heard Yusaf promise that and wondered—was the man telling him what he wanted to hear or would he actually do as he said?

Three days after his meeting with Clarke and the General, Routledge received a telegram from Peshawar. The telegram stated that Sennett had been recently thrown from his horse and had suffered a badly broken leg. Sennett’s injury was so bad that it was expected that he would be incapacitated for three months at least. Routledge went back to his list of candidates and arranged another meeting with Clarke to discuss Sennett’s replacement. Topping the list of candidates was Edrich.

Chapter 10

‘Major Edrich has wide experiences of remote areas beyond India’s borders and can speak Chinese I grant you,’ Routledge began opening the meeting arranged the day after the news about Sennett’s injury had been received. ‘However he has, we have, a problem, he cannot speak Russian or any of the languages spoken by the tribes in Turkestan. We agreed they are a prerequisite for this position.’

Clarke leaned back in his chair and scratched his chin then after a pause said in a slow drawl, ‘ideally, yes. But, our chap in Kashgar must first and foremost be able to speak Chinese, which Edrich can. If he could speak Russian that would be an advantage but very few of our chaps have had the chance to learn it. Sennett was exceptional because he spoke both. Edrich can learn Russian and any other required languages when he’s up there. God knows what else is there to do in such a remote place.’

‘I know Edrich,’ Routledge lounged back in his chair and his eyes glazed as he thought out loud, ‘we served together on Younghusband’s trip to Lhasa in 1905. I think he is one of those chaps who picks up languages easily—he speaks about five already—no trouble I suspect in picking up another two or three.’ There was silence for a moment then Routledge added almost as an afterthought, ‘as for making him a Lieutenant Colonel that will not cause us a problem because like Sennett he is a senior major.’

‘The political work he has been doing in Persia is exactly the type of stuff he’ll be doing in Kashgar: listening for news coming out of Russian Turkestan; collecting statistics on trade; liaising with the Chinese and generally keeping an eye on anything of interest,’ Clarke added.

‘Bit cooler in Kashgar in winter, than Persia I should think,’ said Routledge interrupting.

‘Yes, that does sound attractive until one’s in the middle of it. You know, Routledge, Shushtar must be a bit of a sinecure for a chap like Edrich.’

‘I think he might want a bit of excitement, don’t you think? I’m sure all these fun and games going on in Russia will provide that,’ Routledge responded feeling jealous at the thought of action.

‘One reason he is in Shushtar is because of his health. His wounds took a lot out of him; at one stage I thought he was going to have to be retired. He also needed to be somewhere where he wasn’t going to be shot at,’ Clarke paused before he went on, ‘now we both know it is a tough journey up to Kashgar and that the life style there is harsh. We cannot afford to send someone whose health is going to fail.’

‘True. On the other hand we are sending Hutton there who is probably in a worse physical condition than Edrich. Still Hutton is, and will be, a minor figure and he could at a pinch be left at Kashgar. Hutton’s presence only saves Washbrook from having to do the entire donkey work when he’s in Turkestan.’

‘I gather that’s all he’s good for.’

Routledge grunted. Clarke was right so he changed the subject. 'I bet Edrich has learned some Persian whilst he's been in Shushtar.'

'So?' Clarke looked puzzled.

'Being able to speak Farsi is useful because there are a lot of Persians in Turkestan, possibly as many as a hundred thousand, so if any decide to come across the border into China he'll be able to interrogate them.'

'I never gave Persian a thought? Yes, in that case it would be a useful language to have up one's sleeve.' A look of puzzlement spread over Clarke's face. 'Why come that way from Turkestan? Wouldn't the Persians go south, colonel?'

'Normally, but with this revolution it may be a longer but a safer way home to come via Kashgar. Clarke, what we need to know is whether Edrich is fit or not, and we need the information as soon as possible. Health apart is there anything else to stop us from recalling him from Persia?'

Clarke shook his head. 'I will ask Basra about his health in a telegram that I'll send immediately. If they say he is fully recovered then we will propose him? If Basra is unable to release him or he is still unfit then we will be struggling to find someone of the right background. That is the trouble with a war,' said Clarke sadly. He saw Routledge look at him quizzically so he added, 'it kills every one off. What about Washbrook's and Hutton's availability colonel?'

'Both are available. Washbrook will be released for his duty as from the end of next week. Let us hope that no Pathan takes a pot shot at him in the meanwhile. Hutton says he will be fit for this duty.'

Telegrams about the state of Edrich's health were sent from Simla to the Intelligence Department of the Indian Expeditionary Force, known as Force 'D,' based in Basra. Basra decided that the best person to comment on Edrich's health was the man himself.

Edrich was wading through the week's caravan reports when he received the telegram from Basra. Edrich opened the telegram immediately because whatever it contained was bound to be more interesting than checking the number of horses and camels that had entered and left the city in the previous week's caravans.

To Major Edrich British Consul at Shushtar

How is the current state of your health Stop Would you be fit enough to go on a long and arduous journey across high mountains Stop Reply today Stop

Colonel Leach Indian Expeditionary Force Basra Stop

Edrich read and reread the telegram. He looked at his map of Persia. They had mountains in Kurdistan and Azerbaijan was that where he could be going? He reread "a long and arduous journey across high mountains" if it was further afield it had to be—the Caucasus. Yes, he had never been there and things were happening round there with both the Germans and Turks apparently approaching it. Perhaps he was returning to the military. He thought about that for a moment and decided that he would at least know from which direction the enemy was coming from. Edrich studied the map. He could be going as an

agent; maybe a bit of skulduggery would be involved. He thought for a bit. If he was going to do intelligence work then he'd be in the type of danger that he was in here. He thought on. Wait. Why me? I can't speak any of the languages they use up there. No, it must be North Persia after all because I speak some Persian. That means he would be joining General Muncerville and his Muncerforce doing God knows what. He smiled to himself at least he would be back speaking with native English speakers and even more importantly he would be in mountains which would be far cooler than Shushtar. He flexed his shoulder. It hurt a bit but not enough to stop him getting out of here.

To Colonel Leach Indian Expeditionary Force Basra
Health fine stop Am fit and raring to go on long arduous journey
through mountains stop
Major Edrich Political Officer Shushtar

Edrich's telegraphed reply went off back to Shushtar's telegraph office and on to Basra about five minutes after he had opened the incoming telegram in his office. To celebrate, over Roy's protests, Edrich went and had tea at the teahouse some fifty yards from the Consulate. In the tea house several merchants that he knew, and who acknowledged him, were already drinking tea or coffee ostensibly discussing trade but obviously more glad to be out of the sun. There sitting as usual with his back to wall Edrich was enjoying his cup of tea when Yusaf Bahadur came in and sat on his own. Edrich tried to catch Yusaf's eye but the latter clearly did not want to acknowledge him. As he looked at the inn keeper the thought struck Edrich that the tea house and its environment probably had as many germs as Yusaf's inn because the cup he was drinking from looked like it had not been cleaned since Queen Victoria had died. It was too late he decided to worry about cleanliness what with all his other worries to contend with. The owner no less, rather than the urchin who had served him first, poured his second cup out of the samovar. It was only when he went to drink from the cup that Edrich noticed a slip of paper under his saucer. Edrich did not pick up the paper immediately only as he was leaving did he slip it into a trousers pocket. Edrich exited past Yusuf who glanced at him and from his look Edrich knew that the paper had come from him.

On returning to the consulate Edrich asked Roy if in his voluminous files there was anything on Yusaf Bahadur. Roy appeared fifteen minutes later in Edrich's office.

'Major,' Roy said brandishing the white card with writing on, 'he was seen lurking about here you know this afternoon. It looked as if he was going to come in here according to the guard on duty. It was one of the soldiers, Mika Singh, who was with us yesterday, recognised him. Anyway Bahadur changed his mind and went in the direction that you had just gone.'

Edrich assumed Yusaf had seen him leave the Consulate and had followed him. 'And that is all on your white card is it, Roy?' He asked feigning innocence.

Roy laughed. 'No major, it is not!' He handed Edrich the card for him to read. The card informed Edrich, what he already knew, that the man, Yusaf, was an

inn keeper and a Bakhtiari and that his inn had been severely damaged in the November riot. Roy had underlined the word “severely”. Edrich showed the card to Roy and pointed to the underlined word—Roy laughed.

‘Major, his use and our use of the word are very different. You saw his place. It was like that before the riot. I think it’s a tribal thing against the Lurs.’

Edrich thanked Roy and dismissed him. Once Roy had left the room Edrich read the note. “The three men you seek are not in Shushtar now but one day’s ride outside. They want to come into town with a caravan.”

Interesting Edrich thought that confirmed what the caravanners had told him. He dismissed the discrepancy in distance between the two sources - inaccuracy was one of Persia’s joys. He wondered how Yusaf had come by the information. Were the merchants staying with him? Edrich read the note again waiting for a caravan was no doubt a cover for their entry. How many caravans would allow the three to ride with them? He deduced none because they were known bandits. If the three were part of a much larger party of Lurs a caravan might be coerced to bring them. Then there was the possibility that a caravan might be led by a Lur because like all the other tribes, some had given up the nomadic way of life, but despite that tribal loyalty still governed their actions.

Edrich made himself a new list of all the things he had had to do to find the Lurs and gave it to Roy to make copies for the soldiers.

Chapter 11

Bartlett had dually arrived for his visit which was just the one evening in Shushtar. Whilst Bartlett was sympathetic about Edrich’s threatened murder his orders were to go through Bakhtiari territory, not hunt Lurs. Bartlett told Edrich that whilst he had no instructions to visit the main Lur camp, Captain Yardley leading a different patrol had been given other orders. Yardley was ordered not to travel any further south from Dizful than the Lur camp. Yardley was to arrest the three Lur assassins if he found them provided he avoided any risk of a battle between the tribe and the British soldiers. Edrich hoped that the mere fact that Yardley was actively looking for the three men would mean that Bakir Khan might suspend his murder threat.

Bartlett told Edrich that on his way to Shushtar he had met a caravan going to Dizful led by the merchant Abdul Aziz. Aziz told Bartlett that he had passed a small Lur encampment of three or four men about a day's ride out from Shushtar. Bartlett decided to visit the camp site but when he and his patrol arrived where the caravan had seen the men it was empty. Tracks indicated that if it were the three Lurs then they had gone west and not towards the town.

As each day passed Edrich scanned telegrams for his orders to move, none came. Edrich had been in the army long enough to know either that its wheels were grinding extremely slowly or the journey had been cancelled and the army had forgotten to inform him. Whenever he thought about the telegram he had

received from Basra asking for a reply immediately he reminded himself of what an army colleague had called this situation namely, "The hurry up and wait syndrome".

Edrich made himself busy each day, as he waited for his orders or news of the Lurs. One thing he instituted were patrols through the town each day either taking the patrol himself or, putting the Havildar in charge. Each patrol went on a different route through the town. If Edrich led the patrol he would stop randomly at an inn leave his troops outside and enter the place on his own. Once within the inn Edrich would keep his back to the wall as he discussed the events of the day, the price of food and animals before he would raise the question of the three Lurs with the innkeeper. The Havildar because of the antipathy between the locals and the Indian troops never entered any of the inns' rooms merely asked the innkeeper whether the Lurs were either staying there or had been seen—the answer was always no.

Edrich contrary to what might have been expected of him also visited teahouses and many of the merchants in town. He did this to show everyone that he wasn't afraid—he was but he felt that he couldn't afford to show it. Edrich also felt that in the narrow streets of the town he would be safe believing rightly or wrongly that if the assassins were to open fire too many bystanders could get injured and if that were to happen then the Lurs would be involved in one or more feuds. Edrich felt as he had told the governor that the Lurs would be unlikely to try knives as he would not give them the chance of getting that close to him. On his travels about the town Edrich discovered that though some of its inhabitants had sympathy for the Lurs for whatever reason the majority of the townsfolk were pro-British or at least they said they were. The reason the local people inevitably gave for supporting the British was that since they had arrived banditry had diminished significantly resulting in better trade for the town and cheaper goods for the townsfolk. The support for Edrich in his search turned out more positively than he imagined.

The arrival of the Lurs in the second week of his search, were reported to him by three different sources. The men had arrived in disguise as part of a caravan run by a Lur, Gholam Rajabzadeh; who when challenged by Edrich confirmed that they had been with him. Gholam also said that the three had not told him why they were coming to town and that if he had known of their intentions he would not allowed them to accompany him. The following day the owner of an inn contacted Edrich saying that the Lurs had stayed the previous night; they had left by the time Edrich had arrived at the inn. When Edrich asked the innkeeper why he had not let him know about the presence of the Lurs sooner the man said.

"They arrived in the dark, Major Edrich. Only when I saw them in the daylight did I see that they were the men you seek. I am poor and I needed their lodgings money before I could send word to you."

Edrich had noticed that the inn was particularly run down and that the man probably did need the money so he kept his temper under control and gave the man ten tomans. It was clear that the three Lurs were moving about the town as surreptitiously as possible. From the information received from his sources the three Lurs sought accommodation with fellow tribesmen who had houses in

the town. Edrich felt that the best people to search private houses were Ravgani's men. Ravgani surprised Edrich and probably the whole town by activating the police when he received the news from the British Consul about the men's presence there.

Edrich was concentrating doing paperwork that afternoon when his office door received such a pounding that he felt it might fall down. Before he could issue a command to enter Roy had leapt in bursting with excitement.

'I can't believe it. It's a miracle. It's fantastic. The most amazing thing has happened. You won't believe it.' Roy slumped in a chair without even being asked. He shook his head, 'I never thought I would live to see this.'

'Well that is interesting, perhaps, my dear excitable chief clerk, you will tell me what you'd thought you'd never see,' Edrich said laughing

'Ravgani and his police doing something—they have arrested the three Lurs.' He looked at Edrich, 'major, it is true. I don't know how but they are under lock and key—all three. We are invited to go and see for ourselves.'

Edrich who had been just about to total the numbers of caravan animals that had arrived in Shushtar that week put his pen down, put on his cap and was out the door with Roy in less than five minutes. When they reached the police building they found Ravgani, as to be expected, was like a dog with: two tails; a bone; a cowardly cat cornered against a huge wall. Whilst Edrich and Ravgani discussed how efficient the police had been in finding the men Roy went to the cells to confirm that the three Lurs were there. Roy was also to verify that because he knew Issa Bamdad by sight that he was indeed one of the men in custody.

Edrich had decided not to see the men but let local justice take its course. Not seeing the men had its drawbacks because Edrich had to listen as Ravgani sing his own praises. After what he considered a reasonable length of listening time he pleaded pressure of work and set out to return to the British Consulate with Roy.

'I can't believe it, major. I just can't.'

'What can't you believe this time, oh unbeliever! That the police actually found and arrested the men?'

Roy laughed. 'No, I admit that the police have those three men in gaol.'

Edrich stopped in the street and looked at Roy with puzzlement, 'what do you mean? You said that one man was known to you and he was Issa Bamdad.' Roy nodded vigorously, 'and we were told the other two were Habib Kirmani and Riza Ali Dastgirdi. Do you think they are not?'

Roy could not stop laughing, 'you are missing the point, Major Edrich. Yes it is the three men who were sent to kill you. However,' he paused.

'However what, Roy! Come on out with it!'

'The police never arrested them.'

Edrich looked perplexed, 'Roy you are not making sense. Ravgani has told me they are under arrest and they are in gaol—where you saw them. If there are no current charges against them some will be found. You think he is a liar?'

'No. What happened was that the three men actually went to the police station and surrendered. It seems that they had so many people looking for

them that they feared they might be killed by people keen to get in the British good books or, for the sheer fun of it.'

Edrich looked at Roy studiously for a moment before laughing ironically. 'Why do I just know you are telling the truth? Who told you they surrendered?'

'The policeman who took me to the cells to see them, told me.'

'I don't care. They are under lock and key. Every dog has his day. Let Ravgani have his.'

'You think Ravgani is a dog?'

'No,' replied Edrich who spent much of the rest of the morning trying to explain to Roy exactly what the phrase, "Every dog has his day," meant but got nowhere because both of them were too light hearted to take anything seriously. After lunch Edrich tried and failed to get back to his statistics; he just couldn't concentrate so he switched to painting and drawing. Edrich had finished his drawing of Mousafi the week before now he took it out and yet again made changes that he decided would be the last. The problem was he had done at least four final changes already; the paper was beginning to suffer from the alterations. Edrich had just switched to his watercolour of the King based on the photograph that hung in his office when Roy entered the room one afternoon with a telegram. Edrich had a premonition and tore the telegram open like a jackal on a carcass.

To Major Edrich British Consul at Shushtar

First return to India to receive orders stop Then proceed Kashgar Chinese Turkestan on mission stop Do you want to do this stop Reply immediately stop

Colonel Leach Indian Expeditionary Force Basra Stop

Kashgar not the Caucuses! He had not been to Kashgar but he knew where it was and what it was. He pored over a small-scale map of Russia and China. Robbins had been British Consul General there for donkey's years why on earth would they want him, Edrich, to go there? God it was a remote place and his heart sank at the thought. On the other hand it was a long way from India and he could be as independent as anyone could be; his spirits lifted at that thought. He looked at the painting, grimaced before he picked up his pen paused for a moment and wrote:

To Colonel Leach Indian Expeditionary Force Basra

Am willing to go Kashgar stop Await your orders

Major Edrich Political Officer Shushtar

The telegram ordering him to report to Basra arrived the following day. The speed of communication staggered Edrich he had never known the army move so fast. Edrich's replacement was to be a Captain Pimms to whom he was to hand over in Basra rather than at Shushtar, which would have been the normal practice. Another surprise was that a motor car was being provided to take him to Basra.

Chapter 12

Once the go-ahead to recall Edrich to India had been taken and the telegraph despatched to him, Clarke and Routledge arranged a meeting with General Harris to discuss the Kashgar Mission.

'How long before everyone arrives?' asked General Harris.

'Washbrook and Hutton will be here by the end of the week, sir, Edrich sometime next week. Exactly when will depend on how quickly he can get a ship from Basra,' Routledge explained.

Clarke added, 'All the stores they need are currently being requisitioned and everything should be ready for them to go as soon as possible certainly by the end of April. Major Edrich will be promoted to temporary Lieutenant Colonel and will replace Robbins in Kashgar. Major Washbrook will lead the military side of the mission into Turkestan.'

'The only fly in the ointment might be the weather, General Harris. It could delay us for possibly a week or so,' Routledge suggested.

'Quite,' said Harris who stood up and walked to the window. He surveyed the scene for a moment. 'The mission may not go immediately indeed it still may not happen at all. It seems that London have not made up their minds whether they wish to proceed. There appear to be problems that must be sorted out. These problems will come as no surprise to either of you. They are of course the Chinese and the Afghans.' Harris turned and walked back to his desk and sat down. 'The Chinese Government has not yet given permission for this mission to leave from their territory. We obviously hope that this will be given. Thoughts?'

'The Chinese, sir, should I think, want to find out what is happening in Russia as much as we do,' said Clarke positively. 'If war had not broken out in Europe, Russia almost certainly would have tried to conquer Sinkiang and assimilate it into their Empire. But since the Chinese Emperor's downfall in 1912, the Peking government has been gradually re-taking active control of their far-flung outposts. Russia's upheaval should enable the Chinese to re-establish firm control of Sinkiang.'

'Actually they never do worry what other countries think do they, Clarke?'

'No. They only are interested in what happens within their borders. Maybe we should be playing the Russian expansion theme again, colonel?' Clarke looked at Routledge.

'Possibly the Sinkiang tribes could be roused by the Russians to revolt against China if their brethren in Turkestan are doing the same against Russia.'

'Are they likely to and would that help us or hinder us?' The general stared at Routledge.

'Well the native Sarts, revolted last month against the Bolos but it didn't succeed. We have reports that a lot of the Sarts were killed. I suspect that if the

Sarts failed to throw off the Russians then the Chinese tribes will stay quiet - I see that as neither a help nor a hindrance.'

'There is our dear friend the Emir of Afghanistan, what about him, Clarke?' Harris asked.

'We know he will not like the fact that what we are proposing is a military mission. He knows that the Russians have been our friends whether he knows that they no longer are quite so chummy with us we don't know. But, no news from Kabul as yet as to which way he may go.' Clarke's voice trailed off as he stared into space. Clarke focused his eyes firmly back onto the two soldiers before him as he thought what to say, 'he may have the same worries as the Chinese—any potential tribal conflict in Russia could spill over into Afghanistan.'

'The more we delve into this the more it confirms that we have no idea what is happening, or what people are thinking in Turkestan, so this mission makes sense. We must assume, for the moment, the mission will go ahead so get it in readiness as soon as possible, gentlemen. This has been a most informative meeting, thank you.' The general's nod of the head to accompany his last phrase indicated the meeting was at an end.

'General, there are a couple of things about getting up a mission to go to Tashkent that perhaps London have not realised and that we did not discuss at our first meeting or today,' said Clarke.

'And, what pray might that be?' demanded the general.

'Indian subversives,' replied Clarke.

'Ah!' The general allowed his countenance to change. 'You've been speaking to our friend, Langridge, the policeman. What is he saying? Does he know something?'

'He thinks that our friend Rohit Panchal is in Russia and that he may be trying to get back to India via some indirect route. It seems these Bolsheviks are all for giving natives the power to run their own governments whether it is in Russia itself or India.' Clarke noticed the look of puzzlement on the general's face, 'I think what the Russians say and what they do may be rather different.'

The general stared at Clarke for a moment, 'undoubtedly - rhetoric versus action.'

'So, sir, Langridge thinks the Bolos may well be helping Panchal to come back here. There may also be a number of other subversives coming back with Panchal. Langridge would like to know whether Panchal is in Tashkent. If he is then maybe we could do something about him and his cohorts,' said Clarke.

The general looked really interested at this statement. His favourite reading was the spy fiction written by Le Queux and Buchan. In his mind he knew that Langridge didn't work in the glamorous world written about by those two men; but in his imagination he always felt that Langridge did exist in a shadowy cloak and dagger world that was so much more appealing than his own. 'I think all three of us would agree that we would rather not have that gentleman back here. How does Langridge know about Panchal?'

'Well he wouldn't tell me how he knows, general, but I know he has sources close to many of the native parties who are causing us trouble already. Superintendent Langridge doesn't know of our interest in Tashkent it just

popped out in a discussion I was having with him about the war. So anyway sir, Indian subversives are another reason for someone to go up to Turkestan and have a look and a listen.'

'So to sum up' said the general. 'The couple of chaps we would be sending into Turkestan to find out what is happening there solves London's need to know about the military situation but our own worries about the subversives led by Mr Panchal.' The general smiled and added, 'we kill two birds with one stone. I like that.'

'Yes, sir.' Clarke and Routledge said in unison.

'That does put a different light on the affair. Maybe this mission will not be such a wild goose chase after all.' The general's countenance changed suddenly, 'you said Langridge knows that this scoundrel is in Tashkent come on share it with us, how does he know?'

Routledge smiled to indicate that the general had been sharp, 'I told a white lie, sir.' Routledge saw the general stiffen so he went on quickly, 'he's not there yet. We have intercepted a wireless message saying that Panchal was en route from Moscow to Tashkent. Moscow has told Tashkent it must provide him with as much support as possible to get back into India.'

'Perhaps he'll get bitten by a snake,' said the general gruffly. 'No, that only seems to happen to decent chaps.'

'One other thing, general,' Clarke spoke slowly, 'if we do need to stir the tribes up outside India and this Panchal manages to get here the chances of it spilling over our borders increases dramatically.'

'Let us cross that bridge when we come to it, Mr Clarke.' The general looked from one to the other of the men sat before him. Nobody moved so the general went on, 'is there something else?'

'Meshed, general,' reminded Clarke.

'Right, I was just about to come onto that. I had not forgotten. Now where are we with Meshed?'

'Mawle and Fernee being seem very happy to go to Meshed, as there is a chance of some action for them both. I thought you would like to know.'

'Good to hear that from soldiers, Mr Clarke. I have work to do so I must crack on. I'll wish you both good morning.' Routledge and Clarke stood up and turned to go. 'One thing more, gentlemen,' the pair stopped and looked at the general, 'well done.'

Chapter 13

'Colonel Edrich, I presume?'

'Yes Jack.' Edrich laughed as he shook his old friend Jack Young's hand.

'Congratulations on your promotion, I know it is only temporary but I'm sure it will be made substantive. Second, bad luck on drawing Kashgar. Gin and tonic for the colonel, please,' Young said to the waiter.

'Thank you about the first, whilst the second is rather better than it sounds. In Persia I was under a death threat so it is nice to be back in India even if I'm only passing through.'

'What had you done to deserve a death threat?'

'Absolutely nothing! My predecessor, Major Titmus, had hanged a few Lur tribesmen for rioting. Not that the ones he hanged were the actual chaps that had rioted you understand.'

'To encourage the others, I think the expression is,' said Young sarcastically.

'Well it had the opposite effect of encouraging the Lurs to think about bumping him off in revenge. Major Titmus left and I took over and naturally inherited the death threat. The funny thing, Jack, is that the local townspeople actually rallied round and supported me by actively hunting the three tribesmen sent to kill me. Not that that ended the feud necessarily, maybe another three will be sent to do the job.'

'Sounds like Kashgar is a wonderful assignment for you given the circumstances,' said Young pulling a face.

'Yes, but do you know why they chose me for Kashgar?'

Young leaned forward. 'You'll hear from Routledge tomorrow all the details, but this is what I know. Now,' Young waited whilst the waiter put Edrich's drink on the table and was out of earshot, 'there is a mission going into Russia led by Robbins our current consul up in Kashgar. Robbins is retiring and wants to go home via Tashkent to find out what is happening there and in Turkestan generally. The Indian Authorities are worried about the numbers of German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners in Tashkent and whether they could form the basis of a German army to invade India.'

'Really?' Edrich said his face clearly showing his surprise.

'Yes, Bill, really. A Major Washbrook and a Captain Hutton are destined to be the military chaps accompanying Robbins. Do you know either of them?' Edrich shook his head. 'Hutton is all right but was injured in a plane crash and says he is fit for duty but he looks far from it to me. However we are short of alternatives. No, that is not true, there aren't any alternatives. Washbrook,' Young waved his hand from side to side, 'I'll leave you to decide about him. You'll work him out. Have a look at these quickly because I'll have to take them back.'

Young passed Edrich two files one for Washbrook and one for Hutton. For a few minutes the two men sat in silence Young with his eyes closed Edrich's eyes devouring the pages. It seemed that like him before the war they had been intrepid travellers; Hutton had crossed Russia to England via Turkestan. Washbrook had also been in Russia twice. Washbrook had been involved in intelligence work against enemy agents in Eastern Persia as well as more recently along the North West Frontier. Edrich finished reading and nudged Young who opened his eyes and took the proffered files.

'Your role is to replace Robbins at Kashgar.' Young leaned forward and looked round the room before indicating with his head that Edrich should draw closer, 'there is one other thing, which is strictly between us.'

Edrich whispered. 'What?'

Young glanced round the room, 'the news from France is that we have held the German thrust and with American help we now have the beating of the Hun on the Western Front. The Turk is going backwards at a steady rate of knots in both Mesopotamia and Palestine although they are advancing in Russia towards the Caspian. The Austrians and the Bulgarians are beginning to crack we believe. So the feeling is that the war won't last much beyond 1919. Now that being the case you'll want home leave as soon as you can—won't you?'

'Of course I will,' pondered Edrich wondering what Jack was driving at.

'Trust me on this. The officers closest to base will be the ones to go first on leave. Kashgar, which is at the end of the line from here, will therefore be the last place to give leave to its consular officer. You could be in Kashgar for at least four years before you can get home after the war ends.'

'Bloody hell, I won't want that. Christ that'll be 1923 or 1924. I'm not sure my mother will still be alive in 1923.' Edrich sat back with a face like thunder. Edrich's mind began to wander. He would have to deal with the Chinese for four years—God, how he would hate that. They were said to be inscrutable and all his pre-war dealings with them had confirmed that fact. He remembered on his last major trip before the war how hard he had tried to get into Tibet from Western China and how the Chinese authorities had stopped him by procrastinating for months. Then there is this posting. Someone had once told him that Kashgar was a decent place to go as long as you knew you were on your way to somewhere else. Think positive he had been taught so his mind took him back to the Somme and standing up to his waist in water under shellfire; Kashgar had to be better than that—just. He leaned forward in response to Young doing the same thing.

After watching Edrich muse for a few minutes Young broke the silence and whispered, 'this mission may not take place but if it does why shouldn't you be the man to lead the military side of it? You are after all the senior soldier of the three.'

Edrich thought again whilst he sipped his drink. 'How do I do that when I've been selected to become the British Agent in Kashgar?'

'What I suggest, Bill, is that when you see Colonel Routledge in the morning you have a quiet word suggesting that you lead the mission's military side and that Washbrook takes Kashgar.'

'Problem as I see it is that I don't speak Russian which the others do. So they are better qualified than me to enter that country.'

'I've thought of that. When Colonel Routledge asks if you have any thoughts say you have.' Young looked at Edrich's questioning face. 'The Russians are a very suspicious lot. So sending an officer who can't speak their language may make them less so.'

'Sounds good?' laughed Edrich, 'Jack, you really think it viable?'

'The Russians will think they'll be able to pull the wool over your eyes because you can't speak Russian. I think they'll like that prospect. But another thing is they'll also like the fact that you are a colonel because it gives the mission a higher standing than if a mere major was to lead it. That is my suggestion but of course it is up to you decide between 'Might I dice with death in Tashkent?' or, "Do I die of boredom in Kashgar"?''

Edrich looked serious, 'your argument is flawed. What happens when the mission is over? Robbins goes westwards through Russia for home whilst I go back to Tashkent and take over from Washbrook. He will only be doing a holding operation for the length of the mission, say—six or eight weeks—it cannot be more than that.'

Young used his finger and thumb to stroke his nose. He could feel his nose hairs brush against his finger they needed a trim perhaps he would do that in the morning. 'I can't say how long the mission will last. It may last longer or shorter than what you have just said. We are still waiting for the Emir's approval which may take a week, six weeks or even more. A delay may take the mission into the winter and then perhaps if you are in Tashkent you won't be able to get back across the mountains to Kashgar. You would have to come out a different way than you went in, say via Persia. If that happens then you could not get back to Kashgar till next summer and then the powers that be may want Washbrook to stay on as the agent. The man will have been there nearly a year and he will know the ropes and who knows the war might be over by then. In which case you might go on leave and by the time you've done that they will have found you something rather more pleasant than Kashgar.'

'Jack, you are a devious blighter. And I hasten to add a good friend. No wonder you are in intelligence. I love the idea.' The two men grinned at each other. 'So, Jack, how is everything else?'

Chapter 14

Routledge had arranged to brief Edrich and the other two officers in his office the morning after Edrich had met with Young. The schedule set by the colonel was for he and Edrich to have a preliminary discussion before the two junior officers joined them for the full meeting. Routledge had been briefing Edrich for about twenty minutes about his proposed role in Kashgar when the General Harris entered the room.

'Good morning to you both and to you, Colonel Edrich, congratulations on your promotion.' The general shook Edrich's hand, 'I thought I'd just call in to see you as I don't think we have met for about ten years.'

'No, sir, that would be about right' said Edrich and saw this as his opportunity. 'The colonel has been telling me what is happening but I wonder if I can make a suggestion about the role I am to play. I was just about to mention it to him. Would you prefer for us to discuss it first?'

'Well, Colonel Edrich,' said the general looking at Routledge who nodded his head, 'Colonel Routledge does not seem to mind.'

'This mission into Tashkent is pretty damn significant. I am the senior officer going up to Kashgar and I was wondering whether I should go on the mission into Tashkent rather than Washbrook.'

‘But you don’t speak Russian. One of the reasons that Washbrook and Hutton were selected was for that fact,’ said Routledge after making eye contact with the general.

‘Well yes that is true, sir,’ Edrich’s gaze flicked from the general, to Routledge and back to the general, ‘I was thinking that these Bolshevik chaps will be more impressed by the appearance of a colonel than by dare I say it—a major. I will be with Robbins and Hutton who can do all the translating for me. Actually, a lack of Russian may make the Bolos less suspicious of me so that I can get on and find out all the military information about the Germans that we need.’

Edrich paused to give the others time to think about his proposal. When neither man said anything he began again. ‘Our shortest line of communication from Tashkent to you here in India is via Kashgar, and it would be most useful to have a Russian speaker there. After all as the colonel said earlier, there are an awful lot of refugees crossing from Russia into China and some of them may well be up to no good. A Russian speaker might be able to ferret out those blighters. I won’t be able to do that until I have learned some Russian, which will take me time. Also,’ Edrich hesitated for a moment before he received an almost imperceptible nod from the general, ‘I think that the Tashkent role requires recent military knowledge about the Germans. I don’t think either Washbrook or Hutton have served on the Western Front like myself. I understand they have both been involved on the Northwest Frontier which, whilst we all know it is highly dangerous, is not like fighting Europeans. If India is to be invaded by the Germans my recent combat experience as to their methods and equipment might be useful. Of course I do not wish to impute any shortcomings about the military capabilities of either of the other two officers.’

‘Good point, colonel, about your experience and I for one did not think you implied anything about your fellow officers,’ said the general with uncharacteristic familiarity.

‘Yes, agreed, general,’ added Routledge rubbing his chin with his hands before he glanced up to meet the general’s eyes. ‘I have already told the colonel that this consular position is very important to us and so are all these shenanigans going on in Russia.’

Harris looked at Edrich. ‘Would you, Colonel Edrich, excuse us for a moment whilst Colonel Routledge and I discuss your suggestion?’

Edrich left the office and went and stood by a window overlooking the parade ground but close enough to the office so that he could hear the voices though he was unable to hear exactly what was being said. After only a few minutes Routledge appeared at the office door and instructed Edrich to return inside.

Once Edrich was seated Routledge began, ‘we have discussed your suggestion and what we are going to do is this. Once you are up at Kashgar you will review the situation with Sir Walter Robbins. If you both agree that the situation warrants it, you will accompany him into Russia. Washbrook will temporarily act as the consul in Kashgar till your return, when you will replace him.’

‘Thank you, sir. What happens if I can’t get back to Kashgar but have to come out some other way?’

'We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. It almost sounds as if you don't want to go to Kashgar, colonel,' Harris probed.

'No! No! No sir. I'm looking forward to the challenge, immeasurably as it should be infinitely less hot for me, in various ways, than Persia.'

Routledge looked at the wall clock and said brusquely. 'The others should be here now so let us wheel them in.'

'I'll be off,' said the general, 'don't get up.' He left the room and they heard he say, 'morning Major Washbrook, Captain Hutton, go straight in.'

Edrich had met neither Washbrook nor Hutton before and the perfunctory handshake he had with them left him with no clear impression except that whilst Hutton's palms were the sweatier of the two his grip was the stronger.

The two newcomers listened as Routledge briefed them fully as to the current status of the Mission neither spoke until Routledge said. 'There may be a change to your role on this Mission, Major Washbrook. Colonel Edrich has suggested that it might be a better idea for him to go to Tashkent and for you to stay in Kashgar.'

'Can I ask why the change, sir?' said a flushed Washbrook looking from Routledge to Edrich. 'I was under the impression that being able to speak Russian was the key here. I believe that Colonel Edrich does not speak Russian so I don't understand why he might go into Russia instead of me.'

'Correct that I don't speak the language, major,' said Edrich having received visual permission to reply to the question from Routledge's glance, 'I believe that having a Russian speaker in Kashgar will be invaluable during the mission. There is a refugee problem there, and it is of the utmost importance that we stop non bona fide people from crossing into China en route into India. My lack of Russian will stop me being able to weed out any such undesirables. Your undoubted skills in Russian will enable you to do that which I cannot.'

'Also,' added Routledge carefully, 'it has been decided that it is important to have someone who has had recent experience of fighting Europeans on the mission. Colonel Edrich has served on the Western Front and knows German military methods. He will therefore have more knowledge on what to look for.' Routledge squirmed in his chair as he added, 'unfortunately neither you Major Washbrook, nor you Captain Hutton, have had experience of fighting the Germans.'

'Sir, I must dispute that.' Washbrook spoke slowly as his face went white, 'it is true I have not fought the Hun or Johnny Turk but the military experience I have from the frontier is just as likely to be relevant. After all the Germans will have to come through the mountains and no doubt they will get help from the Pathans and the Afghans. My recent service up on the Khyber Pass skirmishing with the former would be invaluable.'

'Nobody doubts your military experience major. When I made the comment it was not intended to be derogatory. Captain Hutton has similar experience to you as indeed has Colonel Edrich on fighting the Pathan. Indeed we all have as well as the Afghan. However that may be, the general and I thought on reflection that it would be useful once the mission got to Tashkent to have someone with experience of fighting the Germans in the party.' Routledge spoke soothingly yet firmly.

'When I was asked about my availability for this trip, sir, I was released on the understanding that I was going on a mission to Russia and I would then return to my posting.' Washbrook replied looking directly at Routledge whilst fighting to keep his face from showing anger.

Routledge shifted in his seat and glanced across at Edrich who took the hint and spoke. 'Colonel Routledge said, major, that this change was a possibility only. I will discuss with Sir Walter whether I accompany the mission, or whether you will. Our judgement will be made when the time comes. With so many ifs and buts about getting approval to go ahead that it is more than likely that I will remain in Kashgar and you return here having been on a wild goose chase. Who knows,' Edrich forced a smile, 'by the time that we get up there the war may be over. I hope that satisfies you.'

'Yes, sir, but what about my colonel?' said Washbrook.

'Colonel Simpson has released you for the duration of the mission major, he knows it may happen or it may not happen,' Routledge replied sharply.

Edrich could feel Washbrook's antagonism as he sat sulking in his chair so he decided to change the subject. 'These Bolsheviks we will meet up in Tashkent, Colonel Routledge. Who actually are they? What do they believe in?'

'Well,' Routledge hesitated, 'we don't know much about them. London must know more than we do otherwise this mission would not have been dreamt up. I know they are some sort of socialists but we really don't know what they stand for—a bunch of revolutionary thugs probably lusting for power. Anyway if you go, you'll find out won't you? Well let us continue, gentlemen,' Routledge looked down at his notes lying before him on his desk, 'going with you to Tashkent will be one of the last of the Emir of Bokhara's relatives, Shahzada Iskander Beg. His duty will be to act as a translator from the Turkic language that these Sarts speak up there. Also being of royal blood we may use him as a focal point if we need to stir up the Sarts against these Bolos.'

'I don't know much about socialism, sir,' said Edrich, 'but if these Bolos are real revolutionaries like they were in France in Napoleon's time will they take kindly to a prince rolling up with us? They may want to kill him.'

'Is it not up to us to protect him, colonel?' Washbrook interjected.

'I know that, major,' said Edrich not looking Washbrook.

'Quite so,' said Routledge quickly. 'We have been at pains to point out to Shahzada that he must play down his royal antecedents until we need to use them if and when the time is ripe.'

'Are we taking anyone else?' asked Hutton.

'I am just coming to that and the travel arrangements, captain,' said Routledge testily. 'You will take a detachment of troops from the Guides with you and these will meet you in Kashmir from where you will leave. As we have estimated the number of colliers you need is in the region of a hundred and sixty you will have to travel in three separate parties. The reason being, of course, that the accommodation en route, as you all know is limited. Each party will be led by one of you officers. You are to leave immediately for Srinagar where you will organise your individual parties. I need hardly need to emphasise that as this is a secret mission you have to ensure everyone keeps mum.'

'That will be difficult with such a large party, sir,' said Edrich.

'But not impossible, colonel,' interjected Washbrook.

'I know nothing is impossible, major,' Edrich replied turning his head deliberately and slowly to look at Washbrook.

'Good glad to hear it. Now, codes,' said Routledge, 'each one of you will have a code. I know the major and the captain have seen Major Young to get their code already. You see him directly after this meeting, Colonel Edrich, to get yours. Also, colonel, the general wishes to see you this evening so your departure will be the day after tomorrow so that you can get everything you need for your stay in Kashgar. Major Washbrook and Captain Hutton will leave by train to Rawalpindi this afternoon and then onto Srinagar.' Routledge looked at the others and after several seconds, 'thank you gentlemen.'

The two junior officers looked at Edrich and when he stood up they followed suit and the three men left the room in silence. In the anteroom outside the general's office sat Fernee and Mawle who stood to attention when the three Kashgar bound officers came through the door. Brief introductions were exchanged between the five men before Mawle and Fernee were called into the general's office for their briefing for Meshed.

'Surly man, our Major Washbrook,' said Edrich as he sat opposite Jack Young. 'I had a word with him after the meeting with Routledge. He twittered on about how important it was to speak Russian on this trip. Then he said the visit to Russia was the reason his CO had let him go. He said the comment by Colonel Routledge about my fighting the Hun when he hadn't, offended his honour. I told him that was poppycock and that in the meeting I had already said Colonel Routledge was not impugning his honour by making that remark merely stating a fact. Maybe up in Srinagar we can talk more easily.'

'I think one of the problems he has is your promotion. Washbrook is close to your seniority but you were promoted rather than him—that annoys him immeasurably,' Young shrugged.

'Well that is the army for you. He has to get over it. Mind you,' added Edrich with a twinkle, 'it must be a disappointment being passed over for me.'

Young laughed. 'You said it, Bill, not me. Let him stew. Now your code, you still take Sherlock Holmes with you wherever you go?'

'Yes.'

'Well *'The Sign of the Four'* is your codebook. If you have to write secretly use *lemon* or *onion*. Now something I can tell you which, the others do not know. We can intercept wireless messages being transmitted from Moscow to Tashkent and other places in Russia. Using these intercepted messages allows us to know what these Bolos are thinking and going to do. Hopefully we may be able to arm you with any pertinent information these intercepts give us before you leave Kashgar. If we do then if you ever have to refer to a source of this information you must say the information comes from an agent not from an interception.'

'I will remember that. I gather from Routledge that when we get to Kashgar we can send telegrams out via China. That sounds better than sending stuff down to India by runner. Is it?'

'Theoretically, yes. It takes only eleven days to get to Peking as opposed to four weeks by runner to Gilgit and telegram from there. There is one slight

snag. The telegrams we have received using the China route have all so far been jumbled and utterly useless. So stick to the runner or at least send copies of all messages by both routes. The Chinese may one day improve their service.'

'Who knows anything about what they'll do—it's one reason to go to Russia instead. Why does the general want to see me by the way this evening?'

'Well he has a soft spot for you ever since you won that cricket game you both played in.' Young giggled, 'apparently he had a bet with the opposing regiment's colonel on that game and he won a lot of money thanks to your efforts. Probably he also feels you needed a bit of extra rest before you set out on the four to six-week journey north or it is possible that he is saving you from having to travel north with Washbrook.' Young changed his voice tone to one of concern, 'what did you think of Hutton by the way?'

'He limped pretty badly when he came in and seemed to have problems with breathing. Are you sure he's up to it? He didn't say much. Perhaps being the most junior officer in the room he was over awed by all the intellects facing him. Any attributes?'

Young rested his chin on his hands and thought carefully before replying. 'Let me say short of all our chaps being killed worldwide that he will not get promotion beyond major—and that will still be beyond his capability. He would be over awed by anyone with half a brain,' Young hesitated, 'possibly no brain.'

'Great.'

'Look, Bill, I can't say you have been dealt with a hand from a full deck of cards with these two. Hutton has two things going for him he speaks Russian and there is literally nobody else. Perhaps he will grow on you.'

Edrich laughed ironically, 'Well a four to six-week journey over some of the roughest and highest country in the world will give us a chance and we'll be going in separate groups. I would have thought any doctor would not have approved of sending him on such a trip.'

'It is as well then that I'm not a doctor.' Young decided to change the subject, 'will you get much painting in do you think?'

'I hope in the afternoons when it gets too hot to march that I can find some shade do some sketching. I hope so. Anyway I better do some shopping and write to mother and get that off this afternoon. Thanks for your help, Jack. I wonder how long it will be before I see you again, six months—a year—two years.'

Young looked at his watch, 'about six hours actually, because I'm dining with you and the general this evening.'

Edrich threw his head back and laughed then remembered, 'what about money?'

'Ah yes, money. I wondered when you would ask. I'll split up the sovereigns between the three of you. It will be your and Robbins decision as to whether and how you spend it though suffice to say keep good records and get signatures when you parcel it out. Do be careful about to whom you give it and why you gave it to them because monetarily things are very tight.'

'Of course, Jack.'

'I have to say, Major Washbrook I thought it a bit off what the colonel said about us not fighting the Hun.'

‘A bit off, a bit off, it was a disgraceful thing to say. We both volunteered to fight in Europe. Well I did and I assume you did?’ Hutton nodded quickly before Washbrook continued, ‘however, the Empire needed us here to keep the bloody natives at bay. Edrich can’t speak Russian. So he says others will translate for him. That’s no good. You shouldn’t have to rely on others to do your talking. I wouldn’t have to because I speak the language really well. I came on this mission on the understanding that I was going to Russia. I’m not sure my CO would approve of this change of plan.’

‘Still, sir, the mission might not happen.’

‘Irrelevant, Captain, it is the principle of the matter and the slur to our personal military capability. “Oh I’ve fought the Hun I know better than you”.’ Washbrook stuck his tongue out put his thumbs in his ears and wagged his fingers.

Hutton laughed uncomfortably before he replied, ‘let us hope it is a wild goose chase then, Major Washbrook.’

‘Captain Hutton, I have better things to do than to go on wild goose chases. I have, or had, more important things to do up on the Khyber.’

‘Yes, sir, I can imagine.’

Washbrook returned to his newspaper in a manner that clearly indicated to Hutton that the conversation was at an end. The train suddenly stopped with a jolt that almost deposited Hutton head first into Washbrook lap.

‘For God sakes, Hutton sit down.’ Washbrook shook his newspaper violently.

Hutton flexed his back swaying backwards, forwards and then side to side in time with the train. He sat down promptly when he saw Washbrook frown at him over the top of his newspaper.

Chapter 15

Edrich arrived at Srinagar two days after the others but it was too late in the evening to talk to them. The following morning Edrich called Washbrook into his office to discuss planning their journey. Washbrook had already started to organise the three separate parties of men and animals for the journey north so Edrich decided to leave him complete what he had started. The two men agreed that the three parties would take different routes whenever possible and the gap between each group setting off would be three days. Edrich would go first, then Hutton with Washbrook bringing up the rear. When Edrich asked why Hutton was not helping him organize the trip, Washbrook replied that the man was working on his motor bike. When Edrich asked why Hutton was working on a motor bike, Washbrook replied, it was a subject that Hutton wished to broach with the colonel.

‘I think I’ll go and see, Captain Hutton, and I’ll leave you to complete your work. Good job, keep it up.’

‘Thank you, sir good of you to say so.’ Washbrook tone was formal but without warmth.

Edrich walked down to where the vehicles were kept. Hutton was lying on his stomach whilst a corporal squatting beside him was pointing out something. The corporal sprang to his feet and saluted Edrich; Hutton struggled slowly and awkwardly to his feet and performed the same action.

'Morning, Captain Hutton, corporal,' Edrich said as he returned the two men's salutes, 'corporal, would you excuse us for a moment.'

The corporal saluted again and as he marched away he wiped his greasy hands on an oily rag.

Edrich waited until the corporal was out of earshot. 'Captain Hutton, Major Washbrook tells me that rather than helping him you are playing with this machine. Why is that?'

'He said he was happy to do the bulk of the organising but if he needed help he would ask me, sir. I did discuss with Major Washbrook on the way up to Srinagar that motor bikes are now said to be very durable. I thought that we could test that fact if I rode one as far as Gilgit. Also it would save a horse and all its' fodder needs, sir.'

'How so, Captain? Won't you need to carry the motorbike's petrol? What about spare parts? What happens if it breaks down? We are not engineers and we are not taking any with us either. If we are only taking it as far as Gilgit how are we going to get back Army property to its base? How if you are only taking it as far as Gilgit do you propose to go from there to Kashgar?'

'Actually the motorcycle is my own property not the Army's, sir. The machine can carry a lot of the spare petrol itself. The corporal has been giving me a crash course in mechanics. I think that I'll be able to deal with most emergencies myself. As for getting back here well I'll ride the motorcycle back when the mission is over and we are returning to base. You are the only one of us scheduled to remain up there sir. As for travelling beyond Gilgit I thought I'd use an animal.'

'What about your back?'

'My back is still is very painful and stiff but better than it was, sir. I thought that riding the motorcycle would be easier on my back.'

'How, Captain, do you work that out? The road to Gilgit is rough so you'll be bouncing up and down no more or less than probably you would on a horse.'

'Well I do find it easier than being on a horse, sir. I've tried it round here yesterday. After all I don't have to climb up high to get onto this beauty,' Hutton patted the motorbike affectionately. 'None of that arching the back and throwing one's leg over like I would for a horse—I just straddle her.' Hutton looked at the motorbike as Edrich would at a lovely woman.

'You'll only be climbing onto your horse a few times a day, Hutton.' Edrich looked at Hutton and saw the disappointment in the man's face. 'Look if you promise me that this will not interfere with your ability to travel you can use it.'

Hutton's face burst into a huge smile. 'Don't worry, sir. You won't regret it. I'll get to Kashgar safe and sound. Bit like a bad penny I always turn up.'

'No doubt you are that,' said Edrich without thinking as he turned away to walk back to his quarters.

Hutton stared after him not sure whether he had the colonel correctly. He shrugged and with a wave of the hand summoned the corporal back to the

motor cycle. Hutton got on to his hands before lying down beside the machine. 'Now you were saying if I have to adjust the chain, corporal,' Hutton spoke over his right shoulder to the corporal as the latter squatted beside him.

As expected the journey north to Kashgar was physically demanding for Edrich. The higher they climbed the more first one old wound ached and then the other. The journeys invariably started at six in the morning and were suspended by two o'clock in the afternoon because of the effort of walking and riding at high altitudes. It was May so snow still lay heavily on the mountainsides of the Pamir, the Hindu Kush and the Karakoram ranges whilst in contrast the valleys and plains were unbearably hot. Edrich painted: whenever he felt able; whatever was before him; provided the afternoon's weather was benign.

Chapter 16

'I have received this information from the Foreign Office about what is happening in the Caucasus. I think it might cause us problems. Here is a copy.' Clarke handed Colonel Routledge a sheaf of papers which the colonel scanned quickly and then he looked up at Clarke who began to read his version out loud.

'A new country was created out of the three of Russia's Imperial Territories Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The country is called the Democratic Republic of Transcaucasia and its officials signed a peace treaty with the Ottoman Turks. The Turks are ignoring that treaty because they are continuing to invade and occupy parts of this new country. We understand that the Georgians and the Armenians are understandably unhappy about this for the simple reason that they are Christians and the Turks are known to have massacred Armenians in the last couple of years—anywhere between five hundred thousand and a million and a half people it is claimed by Armenian sources. Armed resistance by both Georgians and Armenians has been continuing against the Turks but it has been ineffectual. The Turks have used this resistance as an excuse to continue to acquire territory in the region, exactly as the Germans are doing in Eastern Europe. The Azerbaijanis being Muslim are happy for the Turks to be the occupiers of this new state and have been offering no resistance. The Foreign Office thinks that the chances of this new state lasting are slim at best.' Clarke stopped and put his paper on the desk.

Routledge sat back in his chair with his lips pursed. 'This almost certainly means Baku is the Turk's goal which is exactly, as we predicted. Baku is in the hands of Armenian Bolsheviks loyal to Moscow and quite what this means we have to wait and see. We have to congratulate the War Office on having the sound idea of sending Brigadier Muncerville and the troops under his command up into that area to try and prevent the Turks seizing this vital oil town and potential gateway to India.'

Clark rubbed his finger along his nose, 'Muncerville's job is to train the locals to oppose the Turks but will they fight? Baku may be in the hands of Armenians, colonel, but it is in Azerbaijan where the largest tribe—the Azeris—speak a Turkic language and, as you have said their support is for the Turks. If the Bolos, in Moscow, send help to Baku then that might prevent the Turks seizing the town.'

'Which means, if the Bolos do not send help then, do we need to do something from India? We cannot rely on the War Office and Muncerville's efforts being able to stop the Turk reaching Baku. We have to assume that if the Turks get to that town they will then cross the Caspian, move into Russian Turkistan. India then becomes the target as it was in the early days of the war.'

'I agree. The railway from Krasnovodsk is the key as we have said before. Leave this problem with me and I'll come up with a plan.' The men exchanged glances before Routledge spluttered, 'I will do this quickly.'

The two men move on to discuss the deafening silence from Kabul, where the Emir of Afghanistan had still not given its support for the Edrich Mission. Neither man could come up with a reason. Routledge suggested that it had been unnecessary to have told the Emir about it in the first place as the mission was not going through Afghanistan. Not informing the Emir said Clarke would not have been a sensible thing to do. Clarke re-iterated the point that the Emir needed to know what the tribes who spanned the Afghanistan and Turkestan borders were doing because they might have been imbued with revolutionary spirit by the Bolsheviks—he'd not want that crossing the border.

Chapter 17

Barely a week after Routledge and Clarke had had their meeting about the new Democratic Republic of Transcaucasia they received intelligence that the country no longer existed and had been replaced by three separate states Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. These three new states had made individual approaches to the Ottoman Turks and Germany. In the same week the Emir of Afghanistan had finally transmitted his approval for the Edrich Mission which had now begun its long journey to Kashgar. A meeting with General Harris was arranged to inform him of these facts and discuss proposals for which they needed his backing.

Clark opened the proceedings, 'we have received information which is very worrying. The new Georgian republic has signed a treaty with Germany. This treaty clearly is one in the eye for the Turks and may drive a wedge between them and the Germans. Georgia has had close ties to Germany for many years. German troops have apparently already arrived in Tiflis, the Georgian capital, under the command of General Kress von Kressenstein. The troops under his command are Germans, recently based in the Ukraine and the Balkans, plus the Georgian Legion of the Kaiser's Imperial Guard. The Germans have been granted full access to the Georgian railway system. Although Georgia's eastern

boundary does not reach the Caspian the use of its railway would bring that sea much closer for the Germans. Use of the railway will ease troop movements and supply issues if they decide to cross into Turkestan and threaten India.'

The general murmured to himself before he said, 'Kressenstein is a good general putting him in charge means that the Hun needs business.' He turned and stared at Routledge, 'I hope you have a suggestion for me Colonel?'

'Indeed I have, replied Routledge. 'First, Mr Clarke does have some information about what the Armenians are doing.'

'Armenia too has signed a peace treaty with the Central Powers, placing itself under the protection of Germany. However, Armenia blames Germany for not doing enough to stop the Turks from massacring Armenians over the last two years. So what Armenia is doing is also appealing to the Austro-Hungarian's for support—though what they can do is anybody's guess. We are almost certain that with these peace treaties signed the way to Baku is open for Germany. The Germans need oil for their submarines and Baku is the obvious place for them to get it.'

'We are sure that this information is correct?' The general asked looking from one to the other men opposite him who both murmured that it was. The general looked up and stared at the map hanging on the wall as if to remind himself where the countries, they had just been discussing, actually were. After a few moments he shifted his gaze to Routledge and raised his eyebrows. 'General Muncerville has the task to sort out the threat to Baku with his Muncerforce we cannot get involved even if we wanted to. Instead, I have just received orders from London concerning our new vital role in North-East Persia. He looked at the papers he had received from the Chief of the Imperial Staff's office. 'London is worried that Northeast Persia is a possible gateway for an Indian invasion force. They want it plugged and they are sending us Colonel Barber to command a mission based in Meshed. We have to find troops for his command,' he waved the paper. 'The colonel will be promoted Brigadier General on arrival from Mesopotamia where he is currently performing an intelligence role. His journey may take a couple of weeks because he has to get a ship from Basra here where after a briefing he will go to Meshed.' The general sat back, 'once onboard the ship he will be telling everyone, as usual, how wonderful he is.' After seeing Routledge's and Clarke's wry smiles the general continued.

'Colonel Statham currently commanding in Meshed will concentrate on local Persian issues and forestalling German and Turk activities. Brigadier General Barber takes over command from Statham who will report to him. The general will look at events across the border in Russian Turkestan and provide us and London with key intelligence on any troop movements and on the cotton crop. 500 Punjabis of the 19th Punjab regiment will be Barber's fighting force. I want copies made of General Barber's exact role and responsibilities when they arrive from London. We cannot afford to get things wrong or we will be up to our neck in Hun and Turk before we realise it. I expect the general's visit to India to be fleeting—we need him in Persia—yesterday.

Chapter 18

'I am very glad to see you again Zair Khidar. How was your journey?' Colonel Statham asked.

'It is very bad there in Turkestan I could barely get through but luckily for me these Bolsheviks accepted me as a poor merchant.'

'Were you able to use the trains at all?'

'Yes, otherwise I'd still be in Russia amidst all the killing that is going on.'

'What have you seen?'

'In Tashkent: dead bodies are left lying in the road; people are arrested on the street and not being seen again; goods can't get into the city because bandits are raiding incoming caravans, so many businesses are closed. It's like Persia was before the Russians and British imposed order on us.'

'Some Persians don't like that order,' Statham said.

'They do if they are merchants like me,' replied Zair Khidar. 'I stayed with my cousin in Tashkent and many of his friends, who did not know what I was doing there, told me without my prompting that they wished the British would invade Turkestan and bring order.'

'Did you see any Germans there?'

'Oh yes, some of the Germans in Tashkent, were not POWs, but were from Germany itself—one could tell by their smart clothes. These Germans were trying to buy cotton, according to some of my merchant friends. I saw many Europeans that I understand were POWs but I am not sure who were German and who were not—they were all so poorly dressed. What I do know is that some of these POWs are now fighting for the Bolsheviks.'

'Do you know if the Germans who were trying to buy cotton succeeded?' Statham asked looking up from his note book.

'No, they have not succeeded, probably because everything is so shambolic in the town. I met a man called Compton who said he is the American consul in Tashkent. Compton asked me to give you this.'

The Persian took off his hat and removed a small piece of paper from its inside. Statham unfolded the paper and read it before placing it on the table in front of him. Statham thought for a moment, then picked up and re-read the paper.

Statham thought why would the Americans have a man there—nobody from India had said anything about that. Statham snapped, 'are you sure this Compton is an American and a consul?'

The Persian looked taken aback by the colonel's tone. 'Absolutely! One of the cousins I stayed with knows someone in the Tashkent government. This person apparently told my cousin that Compton was an American and he had official documents that allowed him to be a consul in Tashkent. Nobody however seems to know why he is there.'

'How did you meet him? What did you tell him?'

The Persian thought for a moment and sipped his tea. 'The American was interested in cotton and the railway though he called it a railroad?' Zair looked

questioningly at Statham, 'I thought Americans spoke English? Sometimes I could not understand his words.'

'They speak a different dialect. You did not say how you met him.'

'My cousin the cotton merchant introduced me as a traveller from Persia interested in trade. After a long time of talking I said I would be coming back to Persia. Compton asked if I could bring a letter to the British consul in Meshed.'

'Thank you, very good work. I shall of course pay you for being such a good postman.'

Zair smiled in reply.

Once Zair had left and Statham had read Compton's note he still found it hard to believe an American was interested in cotton. America grew tons of the stuff herself and of far better quality than any cotton grown in Russia—perhaps some disease was rife in their fields. The story was so strange it might just be true, Zair was a reliable agent. Statham would immediately despatch a report to India about the American and what he was doing in Tashkent—Simla could then decide if or what to tell London.

Grimes sat opposite Lord Surridge. 'I have been doing some digging on Compton. The Foreign Office (FO) knows all about him. Seems he worked with our man in Moscow, Flockhart, in getting the Bolos to allow us to get into Archangel and stop the Huns advance in that area. Then for some reason the Bolos got unhappy with what he was doing, undercover secret stuff I'm told, and it was decided he needed to leave Russia. Perhaps because it was easier, the Bolos were told that Compton had died. He was smuggled out very much alive to London. He discussed various issues with our Foreign Office chaps before going on to Tashkent.'

'What issues? Turkestan is our territory not the Foreign Office's area of responsibility. Why haven't they told us about this chap? Did your Foreign Office source say why not?'

'No. This is what he told me about Mr Compton. He is part of the US Consular Service and served in Bristol in 1915 as well as other places in Europe. His role in Tashkent is anti-Central Powers in particular: stopping them buying cotton; stopping the use of POWs as a basis of a new army by getting them repatriated home; countering Germany's claims to being the friend of Islam and trying to somehow stop the excesses of the Bolsheviks in the region. In other words he's already doing what our proposed Tashkent Mission is aiming to do. The advantage as I and the chaps at the Foreign Office see it is that—America may be listened too by the Bolsheviks more than they would listen to us because the Americans are not seen as imperialists.'

'How the Bolsheviks see America is totally irrelevant. There is no excuse for the Foreign Office not to tell us about this man, Compton!' Surridge paused and narrowed his eyes, 'why say he was dead?'

'Ease his way out of the country is the answer to your second question. As for the first,' Grimes hesitated, 'they would not say. It has to be something which they see as residing in their area of responsibility, so clearly not his role in Tashkent. The only thing I can think of which might be of interest to the FO is that Tashkent is on the railway and it's a possible route out of Russia for the Tsar. I hasten to add, my lord that is my deduction based on my reading

between the lines of what I was told. Absolutely nothing was said directly or indirectly about any rescue of the Romanovs or by which route they could get out of Russia.'

Surridge inhaled noisily, 'I didn't think we were doing anything about him or his family. You'd think I'd be told, because of my status, if something was happening—too much secrecy in government these days. So people are being sent, like this Compton, to every conceivable route out of Russia on the off chance the Tsar can be rescued.'

'Delicate issue this Tsar business, my lord that is for sure,' muttered Grimes looking sad.

'Well there is nothing we can do! Get a telegram off to India about this Compton just to let them know we know about him. Also send a note over to the FO saying now we've heard of this American consul Compton being in Tashkent - do they know anything else about him that we should know about?'

Chapter 19

'Mr Clarke,' said Colonel Routledge. 'Do you have any connection with the American embassy?'

Clarke looked startled. 'Well I know some of them by name. If I bump into them I talk to them but that's about it. A most odd question, why?'

'We got a telegram from Meshed saying that they had received a communication from a chap called Compton who is the American consul in Tashkent.'

'An American consul in Tashkent? Why on earth would an American be there?'

'The cotton apparently.'

'What! They can't be interested in the cotton. Their own stuff is far better quality.'

'Well they might not want to buy it for themselves but like us they probably want to stop it getting into the hands of the Hun.'

Clarke leaned back in his chair and pondered for a moment. 'Of course they just may be trying to set up commercial relations with the Bolos. I wonder what London will say? In the meantime you will want me to talk to Van Rennsberg who is the one I know the best in their embassy. I'll see if he will come up with anything or whether he won't say anything.'

'Why wouldn't he say anything?'

'Well he might not know anything. But if the Americans are trying to set up commercial interests in the region it will not be to our benefit so he's not going to say anything about that. One thing though the presence of an American might help our chaps if and when they get to Tashkent.'

'Compton actually suggests that not only us but the French should send consuls to Tashkent.'

'Good God! The French! Why would anybody want them there? Never trusted the blighters myself—they are always just out for what they can get.' Clarke almost dribbled as he spoke.

'I think the Americans have a soft spot for the French ever since they supported the Yanks in the War of Independence,' Routledge said keen to show off his historical knowledge.

Clarke smiled, 'well I dare say that is true but I wonder if that makes them anti-British?'

'Our blockade of their trade made some of their businesses very unhappy,' replied Routledge.

Clarke grunted, 'money grabbers.'

Routledge laughed, 'the Persian who bought Meshed the note from this American has been asked by Barber whether he's willing to go back to Tashkent again. If he does return then somehow he might be useful to the Edrich Mission—if it ever gets to Tashkent.

'How useful?'

'When this agent returns to Meshed he will obviously carry information and therefore we have an alternative communication route to the more direct but unreliable Kashgar or Peking paths.' Routledge stood, 'let us go and see the general and bring him up to date with these events in Trans-Caucasia.' He shook his head, 'the French in Central Asia what a suggestion!'

Chapter 20

'Brigadier-General Barber to see you General Harris.'

'You know Colonel Routledge my Intelligence Officer, of course? Good trip over?'

'Yes, damn seasick as usual. Unless the water is like a millpond it happens every time.'

'Well where you're going that is one thing you won't suffer from. Colonel Routledge will bring you up to speed with what is happening in Meshed and exactly what you are to be there. However before he does that I think I will cover a few salient points.'

'Thank you.'

'General Barber, recently we based a force of cavalry, infantry and local levies in Meshed. These replace the Russian troops who left in February following this damn revolution. Our troops act as a cordon to block any threat coming across the border from Russian Turkestan on their way to India.'

'This revolution can't possibly last, general,' Barber said vehemently.

'Well it may not. However, it is causing us all sorts of problems because with the Russians gone the way is open for both the Germans and the Turks, once they are across the Caspian Sea, to threaten us via Persia or Turkestan.' Barber went to interrupt but Harris raised his hand to stop him and added, 'if the Germans and Turks do get in a position to invade India we are in serious

trouble because of our lack of troops.’ Harris paused for a moment then looked Barber steadily in the eye, ‘there are also Indian agitators, who have been living in Germany, we understand attempting to cross the border and stir things up here. Finally as always there is the threat of jihad. Once again it seems, according to anti-British newspapers in Persia, that the Kaiser has converted to Islam for the fourth or fifth time. Your job is to: stop anti-British propaganda; prevent any German or Turkish spies or agents either getting here or into Afghanistan; stop any Indian agitator crossing back here to India; get us as much information as you can about what is happening across the border in Russian Turkestan, in particular west of the Oxus river and in the plain of Bokhara.’

‘What sort of happenings, sir?’ Barber moved his gaze from Harris to Routledge and back again.

‘There are various groups who are opposing the Bolsheviks and we need to support those if it is in our interests to do so.’

‘How will we know that?’ said Barber.

‘I am afraid that is one of your tasks, General Barber. It is unclear to us just what is happening across the Russian border from Meshed. We must find out, from our perspective, which we need to buttress. That identification done, then we can take the appropriate support action!’

‘Has Colonel Statham had any success so far in finding out what is going on in Russia?’

‘Yes, we had a report last week from him that one of his agents has discovered that Germans are in Tashkent trying to buy cotton.’

‘Was it reliable information?’

‘Yes. It actually confirmed what we already knew.’

Barber nodded sagely. ‘I know Statham he has worked for me before. He’s a good support man.’

Harris tried to stop himself from smiling, ‘quite. Now one other thing if the worst happens and the Germans get across the Caspian the railway will be important to them. You’ll have to try and prevent the German using it when the time comes. Recently we sent two experienced intelligence officers, Captains Fernee and Mawle, to support Colonel Statham. Fernee speaks Russian which might be useful in rooting out any undesirables coming over the border or indeed if you need to send someone into Turkestan on a,’ he lowered his voice, ‘spying trip. You will have to work out how you deal with the Russians, which is a huge responsibility. Whatever you do be wary that you do not commit India to something it cannot fulfil. Questions?’

‘No, sir, leave it to me to make the right decisions when necessary—it’s a habit.’

When Barber had left the office Routledge said, ‘should we have told him about the Edrich Mission?’

‘Good lord, no,’ replied General Harris, ‘secrecy and compartmentalisation is important.’

Chapter 21

As Barber was being briefed in Simla, Mawle and Fernee had finally reached Meshed. When the pair reported to Colonel Statham, the latter was thrilled that the help he desperately needed had arrived. Statham quickly set Mawle to work on: organising the collection of information: disseminating intelligence reports to London, Simla and Mesopotamia; the difficult task of identifying friendly and enemy agents. Fernee was dispatched, post haste, to use his detection skills into what some recently arrived Russian merchants were doing in some of the smaller towns round Meshed.

On the same day as the two British officer's arrival Statham had received a telegram from Baghdad confirming the bona fides of an unknown Russian, Zukoff, who had presented himself to the Meshed Mission the previous week asking for support against the Bolsheviks. The British Mesopotamian Army Intelligence Office based in Baghdad confirmed that both Zukoff and his father were known to them. Baghdad confirmed that both Zukoffs were royalists and were actively working against the Bolsheviks. Baghdad told Statham that he had to make his own decision as to what help he could offer the younger Zukoff.

Statham felt unable to promise Zukoff, the son, anything without more information as to what was happening across the border. Zukoff and Statham had a long discussion about what could be done to rectify the situation. When Statham learnt that Zukoff had once served in the Russian forces based in Persia and spoke excellent Farsi he asked Zukoff whether he would volunteer to go on an intelligence mission into Turkestan and find out what he could about Bolshevik intentions. Zukoff knew his own Royalist group were keen to learn the same information as the British did. Two days after meeting Statham Zukoff left Meshed, disguised as a Persian merchant, for Turkestan on a spying mission.

'I've found out a bit from Van Rennsberg about this chap Compton. It's a bit odd.' Clarke said peering round the half opened door to Routledge's office.

'How so?'

Clarke opened the door fully and went and perched on the corner of Routledge's desk. 'Apparently he was in Petrograd, doing God knows what—Van Rennsberg would not say—and then he was reported dead.' Clarke raised his eyebrows before he went on, 'then he appears in Tashkent. Van Rennsberg either did not know what the chap was doing or was not saying.'

'Which do you think?'

Clarke swung his legs off the desk and slid his legs onto the floor. 'If the Americans are anything like us for secrecy then I think he wasn't saying.'

'I thought Americans were meant to honest and above board.'

Clarke was walking towards the door turned as he pulled it open and looked with a grin at Routledge. 'Or do they just want everyone to think that?'

Chapter 22

When Edrich reached Kashgar five weeks after leaving Srinagar he was exhausted by the journey and he had a touch of fever. Robbins took one look at him and ordered him to bed where Edrich spent two blissful days recovering. On the third morning he felt much better and after breakfast he and Robbins began their first meeting concerning their official business.

'I am a bit confused. I thought that I would be going to Tashkent on my own with someone to replace me as consul, Colonel Edrich. That was certainly what I originally recommended to India.' Robbins then added, 'so I am not sure that I understand why we need a military side of the mission.'

'On Russian political matters, that is up to you. The military mission's purpose is to evaluate the possibility that the Germans will use their POWs as an army to invade India. Originally India decided the mission needed two Russian speaking military officers—Washbrook and Hutton—to evaluate that threat. However, when I was in Simla I made the point that Major Hutton lacks experience of the German military, whereas I served on the Western Front. I suggested therefore, based on my experience, that I can better evaluate the German military threat. I decided to use Hutton as my Russian interpreter, not Washbrook, because a captain is not a sufficient rank to act as temporary consul here, whereas a major is.'

Robbins thought for a moment, 'I can see that understanding what the Hun is up to is important but I cannot believe that they'll invade India though.'

'Alexander did it so it is possible, sir.'

Robbins shook his head. 'Not from here he didn't. It is a very long way through some of the toughest country in the world. I just cannot see it. Still you military men must know your business.'

'India is very worried about the general eastern progress of the Germans. Any news of what is happening in Europe and Tashkent?'

'Not really just garbled news from Tashkent which is oriented to the German view. The last news I received from Peking said that we were doing better on all fronts including the war against the submarines. However, that Peking news would be at least three weeks old.'

Robbins glanced at the papers that Edrich had brought with him. He waved the documents at Edrich, 'according to these, this mission is targeted only to look at the area as far west as the River Oxus. Do you know who, if anybody is looking beyond that river towards the Caspian?'

Edrich shook his head. 'No, nothing was said about it at my briefing. I assume nobody.'

'Well I suppose we can't go meddling everywhere we just don't have the time, money, or men.' Robbins put down the papers and picked up a letter which he held aloft, 'one good piece of news. We will have a new friend if and when we get to Tashkent.' Robbins handed the letter to Edrich. 'It is from the American consul, Compton in Tashkent. I suggest you read it when you get time.'

'I did not realise the Americans had a man there. Nothing was said about it in Simla.'

'Compton has only recently arrived there, so Simla would not have known about him at the time you left.'

'What is his role?'

'Good question. I should not doubt it has to do with trade. It was Mr Compton who was our intelligence source for the cotton and who also raised the worry on the German POWs.'

'What about his own government? Would they like him liaising with us?'

'Well they are our allies, and the Americans have no one close to support him—his nearest help being Peking or Moscow. Also Central Asia the Americans know is our sphere of influence so he probably assumes it is down to us to solve any problems.'

Robbins paused to see if Edrich had any questions. 'I have told India that I think the local Russian ambassador here, Bolotnikov, will smooth our entrance into Turkestan. The ambassador is from the old regime and he's not actually sure what these Bolos will do if he returns to Russia. They will probably string him up, which will be a pity because he's a nice old boy. So it is debateable whether Bolotnikov will accompany us to Tashkent, though he wants to. So any support we may need at our destination will be from my own chaps in Tashkent, which at this stage is all I'll say about the matter.'

Robbins looked at Edrich who did not reply but nodded his head. 'Colonel, if we don't get India's final permission to go to Tashkent in the next four weeks then I will be handing over Kashgar to you and heading south to India and home. I have already indicated to India that I intend to do that because theoretically I should have finished here two months ago. When I sent my final retiring date to Delhi I also took the opportunity to write to the Viceroy suggesting that according to local conditions that this mission ought to go ahead immediately. When the Emir gave his permission for you to come here I thought as soon as you arrived we'd set off. Oh no, India wants a short delay whilst they decide, yet again, for us to go ahead—though they say the mission is vital. At this rate the war will be over before we do anything. I cannot wait indefinitely for them to make their minds up.' He pulled a face, 'I know we await Chinese approval but I honestly believe we could have gone into Russia without it. I am retired after all.'

'What about us military?'

'Robbins shook his head, 'as always military people add a complication. Of course at the moment you are between two stools. I am not waiting much longer for people to make up their minds I need to get home. I am sure you will do a good job here as the consul.'

'Thank you,' Edrich replied as his heart sank at the prospect of remaining in Kashgar. 'Let us hope then that you get your wish to go home through Russia, soon.'

'If we get the Chinese go ahead then we need to act quickly. Bolotnikov who remains the representative of the Russian Government has given me an open letter stating our bona fides and that will get us into Russia. But if he gets replaced by some Bolshevik thug before we leave and the new chap scraps

those bona fides and will not give us new ones that will end the mission. Even if we have Bolotnikov's letter it might not get us across the border because the Bolo border guards may not accept it, or recognize his authority. Then again I'm afraid the mission ends right then and there.'

'You wouldn't try and cross using a different route?' Edrich suggested.

'No, I intend to retire in a living rather than a dead state. These Bolos are a ruthless crowd being little more than bandits. Many of them I understand are ex-criminals, murderers and the like, let out of jail to help terrorise anybody opposed to Bolshevism. I'm not going to take chances that I do not have to with people like that. I say we turn back if we cannot cross.' He looked sternly across at Edrich.

'Yes, Sir Walter.'

'Now something else,' he paused, 'his Highness Shahzada Iskander you brought with you. I have doubts about taking him with us. Since you arrived all the refugees here have been treating him like their long lost prince and falling all over him in order to get in his good books.'

'How have the Chinese taken to that?'

'Whilst he stays here they are happy enough. I think if and when he crosses the border it will be a different matter.'

'You think the Russians might accuse the Chinese of stirring up trouble because of his status?'

'Yes. I also get the feeling that if we take him, his highness even more than Bolotnikov might end up on a rope. These Bolos are apparently killing anyone with any connection to the nobility. It might also seem to the Russians that our mission is to encourage a pro-autonomous Muslim state with Shahzada as head of state. I doubt the Russians want us meddling in their affairs, even less Britain putting someone like him back in power. What was India thinking?'

Edrich shrugged and murmured, 'so we need to see the lie of the land before we get him across the border.'

'Yes, colonel, you travelled up with Shahzada how might he react to a change of plan?'

'I suppose how we broach the subject that will be the key to his reaction. I suggest that what we say to him is that we are worried about what we will find in Tashkent and that we will send for him if we think it safe to do so. We cannot risk any chance of someone like him being murdered—undoubtedly Britain would get the blame for it. When I spoke to Shahzada on the way up he told me he was very nervous about going back. He has not been home for twenty odd years and he knows what the Russians have done to the tribes both recently and in the past, otherwise he wouldn't still be in exile. I'm sure Shahzada will be happy to await our decision. Anyone else we could use?'

'Not as a direct replacement, as it would be as dangerous for them as for Shahzada. The only person I will be taking is my secretary, Bishen Shah, because he speaks excellent Russian, and, the local Sart languages—Kirghiz, Uzbek, and even Mongol. Now Bishen has been in Tashkent on a number of occasions and knows the town's geography and he has family there; needless to say that family could be useful to us.' Robbins spoke the last two sentences emphatically. 'Now to change the subject, if the mission does not go ahead then

you take over from me and so what do you know about what you have to do here?’

‘I assume that you collect statistics on things like caravans coming in and out of the town, the number of animals in each caravan its source and destination, the type of goods that are passing through? This is what I did in Shushtar. However, I suggest we wait for Washbrook because if the mission goes ahead I wouldn’t want you to have to explain your role twice, first to me, then to him.’ Edrich hoped he sounded sincere.

Robbins smiled, ‘I am sure you don’t, colonel.’

Edrich decided a change of subject was called for. ‘I have seen more Europeans here than I expected, are they refugees?’

‘Yes, but that said we have to determine whether they are genuine or not. I have to assume these Bolos are trying to smuggle agents out of Russia. Most of the refugees seem authentic, one merely has to look at the state they are in and the fear they carry with them which almost gives off a smell. Anyway even if they are genuine we then have to persuade the Chinese officials to allow them to travel out through India. Most of these European Russians don’t want to stay in China but they are not always successful in obtaining Chinese travel permits. Those waiting for, or denied, permits are forced to live on their wits and whatever they managed to bring out of Russia. Some of course return to Russia and I have a pretty shrewd idea what happens to them.’

‘I think I can as well,’ mumbled Edrich as much to himself as Robbins. ‘What about our Indian nationals who have been living across the border?’

‘They’ve been coming across the border demanding to return to India. I’m sure some of them are nationalists and trouble-makers but identifying them is so difficult because of the sheer numbers that have been coming across. In the past when Indians came out in dribs and drabs it was easy to check their stories now I am sure despite our best efforts some nationalist agents are getting through. Had any experience of spotting troublemakers, colonel?’

‘Oh, yes, Sir Walter in Persia and of course policing was part of my duties when I served as a political officer on the Khyber Pass. Yes, I’ve done my share of weeding with some success.’

‘You can never get rid of weeds completely, Colonel Edrich. You only think you do. They always have a nasty habit of reappearing time after time.’

‘Still, Sir Walter, we have to keep on weeding to keep our gardens looking as nice as possible for as long as possible.’

‘Does Washbrook weed?’

‘He has worked like me up on the various Indian borders including the Khyber so he’ll have the right experience for spotting Indian troublemakers. Also by being able to speak Russian he might be able to spot any refugee who might be a German agent masquerading as a Russian.’

‘You know, colonel I have been out here since 1890 and the Russians used to be a big problem—the “Great Game”. We and the Chinese were worried about a Russian invasion and on a personal note the Russian Ambassador, not then Bolotnikov, did not speak to me for two years in the late 1890s. In a place where there only four Europeans, as there were then, that non speaking issue seemed a long time. But since 1905 when Britain signed the Entente Cordial

with France that changed because the French allies namely the Russians, ipso de facto became ours in 1907. Now Russia is out of the war I think we'll return to the "Great Game".'

'I remember those days, sir, so no doubt will Washbrook. I was on the Tibet invasion in 1905 where we were definitely trying to stop Russia getting in there first. Bad business really, too many Tibetans unnecessarily killed, still it served its purpose at the time.'

Robbins pulled a face, 'well the Japanese gave the Russians a bloody nose in their war of '04 which is why they changed their tune in 1907 and became our allies after years of bluster.' He paused, 'enough about history. You and your junior officers will attend, with me, all Kashgar's social functions. These are given by the Chinese officials, the Russian Ambassador and the Swedish Missionaries. These functions are what pass for entertainment in Kashgar and something to which you or Major Washbrook will become accustomed too. You will see exactly the same people at every function—that makes them a scintillating experience.'

'I can't wait, Sir Walter,' Edrich put as much boredom into his voice as he could.

'I love keenness, colonel.' Robbins got up from his desk and walked over to the window and stared out into the walled garden. He pointed at the cherry trees, which Edrich could see when he leaned forward in his chair. 'Changing the subject, look at my, soon to be yours, garden. I love cherries and these are nearly ripe. Problem with cherries is not weeds but birds. We have a house in London, Denmark Hill, that I have never seen but Mrs Robbins is happy with it. She says we have two different types of cherry tree there, eating and cooking. I look forward to tasting them though it won't be till next year now.' Robbins returned to his chair. 'To change the subject and get on to more serious things. I understand that you have been painting on your journey. Can I have a look?'

Edrich went and got his portfolio and as he undid the portfolio's linen strings he felt nervous. He always felt that way when showing his work to someone for the first time. He opened the portfolio, waved his hands at his art and stammered, 'all these are pen and wash doodles that I did on the way up. Some of them are unfinished and perhaps one or two I'll attempt to complete if and when I get the chance. Actually I did finish one last night when I felt better, perhaps that is the only one you should see. I'm a bit embarrassed you seeing the rest.'

Edrich put out his hands to pick up the portfolio Robbins restrained him by putting his hand on Edrich's arm. 'As official business is over I hope you don't mind if I call you Bill?'

'No, sir.'

'You must call me Walter.' He held up a painting of Hutton sitting on his motorbike against a backdrop of hills and a group of soldiers. 'Bill, when you are like me hopeless at art I can only admire people with the gift to do things like this.'

'Actually, Walter, it is not a gift, just hard work. It is very frustrating at times I can tell you. There was a Dutchman, Van Gogh, ever heard of him?' Robbins shook his head.

'He painted about thirty years ago. He never sold a painting in his lifetime now his paintings are expensive. Anyway, he used to get so frustrated with his work that he cut his ear off.'

'You do that, Bill, and your hat will fall over your face,' laughed Robbins returning his gaze to the painting. 'This is good. Who is it? He looks to have a very military bearing.'

'That is Captain Hutton done just before I left Srinagar. If, as I hope, he survives the trip you will meet him.'

For the next fifteen minutes Robbins went through all the paintings and sketches that Edrich had done on his travel to Kashgar. Edrich hovered like a nervous mother hen explaining all the while why this one was wrong or that one needed work. Robbins merely shook his head at the remarks and smiled. When Robbins had seen the last sketch he closed the portfolio and grabbed Bill by the arm and led him out of the office upstairs through a bedroom onto a veranda. Edrich whistled his bedroom had been on the ground floor looking over the garden.

'Yes, Bill, this is the best view of the Tien-shan Mountains. Now that fellow there,' Robbins pointed at the tallest mountain that dwarfed the others, 'Mustagh-ata, is reckoned to be about twenty-one thousand feet. I think it'll beat Denmark Hill by about twenty thousand seven hundred feet. Not that I shall mind because all I have to do is close my eyes when I'm in England and there it will always be.'

'Whilst Denmark Hill on the other hand will be rather easier to climb or, you could always catch an omnibus to go up it,' Edrich suggested.

'Exactly, Bill. I can't tell you how much I look forward to having the luxury of going everywhere by omnibus.'

The pair stood and looked at all the other views that could be seen from the balcony.

'You'll miss this rest of these views as well, Walter, they are stunning.'

'Well that is why I've brought you up here, Bill. Will you do me the pleasure of painting these scenes for me to take home?'

'Of course, though whether I'll be able to do them justice,' Edrich shrugged.

Robbins exhaled loudly, 'Bill, do not worry about it. You come up here every spare minute you need even if I'm in bed,' he added with a laugh. 'Look your chaps will be here soon why don't you just get on and do—well a couple of scenes would be wonderful - more would be better.'

Edrich's heart sank as he turned away and raised his eyebrows at the Tien-shan. Edrich could do without the pressure of having painting commissions. He turned back and looked seriously at Robbins who was looking at him curiously.

'Bill, I've just thought of something. How are you at portraits? Don't be bashful, honesty is the best policy.'

Bill shrugged. 'I struggle with them. Eyebrows, noses and mouths give me a lot of trouble.'

'Not a lot left after that then is there?'

Bill smiled sheepishly 'No, not really. Why do you ask? Anyway you'll see when Hutton gets here as to whether I can get a good likeness.'

'Fair enough but what made me think of it is that when we meet the Bolos in Tashkent it might be useful to do sketches of all the characters we meet for our records.'

'Christ, Walter, I'd have to do them from memory because they won't sit for me.' He thought for a moment, 'if I have to do them that way you'd better add foreheads, chins, cheeks and hairline to my difficulties.'

'Still the ears will be accurate, eh Bill? Maybe I could sit with you and advise you on the accuracy of the sketch. Portraits of people are useful information I know a photograph might be better but would for these chaps sit for us—I doubt it—there again we do not have a camera.'

Edrich frowned. 'I am willing to try a drawing.'

'Good man that is the spirit. I have some letters to write which you clearly cannot help me with so why not go and get your painting paraphernalia. I'd like a painting with Mustagh-ata in it, done first.' Robbins pointed to the Pamir Mountains in the west. 'Love that view to be done as well. Lady Robbins is going to be absolutely thrilled by your pictures. If you could also do one of the old town, from here, that would be marvellous. I'll let you decide any other's you can fit in.' Robbins looked up at the sky, 'it is a nice day for painting is it not and I think you still are recovering from your trip so you definitely need further recuperation, colonel.'

The change back to the formal indicated to Bill that he had no option but he smiled as he answered. 'Yes, Sir Walter, I'm still a bit wobbly. Painting will certainly help me recuperate,' he said sarcastically, 'and also ease the tension of our wait for orders.'

'Quite, my dear fellow,' Robbins patted Bill on the back as if they were family.

Bill followed Robbins off the veranda and downstairs where they went their separate ways. A few minutes later Edrich reappeared on the veranda and set up his pencils, ink and brushes on a table, his paper on the small traveller's easel and then stood contemplating the mountains for several minutes. He returned to the table and dragged a chair into position before he put the easel on his lap. Studying the distant Tien-shan Mountains he began with his pencil to recreate the panorama before him. When he had finished with the pencil line drawing he erased and redrew the some of the line several times then when he was satisfied he drew over the some of the pencil marks with his pen dipped in sepia ink- his favourite. He had been struggling for an hour when Robbins reappeared on the balcony.

'William, our well informed Tao-toi or Chinese Military Governor, General Li Wong, wishes to see us tomorrow morning. His residence is in the new town so it'll be a ride of six miles or so.'

'Small beer after the last six weeks, what is he like?' asked Edrich erasing a pencil line.

'In a word, William: a bloodthirsty tyrant; a bully; an extortionist; unpleasant both as a person and as something to look at.'

Edrich pursed his lips as he stared at Robbins. 'That must be the longest word in the English Dictionary, Sir Walter.'

Robbins grinned. 'True. Unfortunately this horrible man saved the Sinkiang Governor's life during the Chinese Revolution of six years ago so we have to put

up with him as the local chief. At one time we were all pretty sure that Russian was going to invade this province but the outbreak of the war in 1914 prevented that happening. I don't think the Russians are in any position, or have any intention to invade at the moment. Wong supports our mission not just because he wants to know what is happening in Russia but he is petrified they might invade. If the Russians invaded Wong would have to fight them. Wong knows he is not much of a general so to say he's apprehensive about that possibility would be an understatement. However I will say this, as a butcher of defenceless people he is absolutely first class. So, we need to keep this horrible man on our side.' Robbins walked over and peered over an uncomfortable Edrich's shoulder before speaking, 'Looks good already,' he waved a hand at the painting, 'best let you get on with it. See you at dinner.'

Chapter 23

Generals McColl and Rixon always discussed the War Office views on Asiatic Russian matters in the latter's office prior to attending the Eastern Committee meeting.

McColl began, 'a couple of very interesting articles have appeared in one of the Swiss German papers. One article said that a Swiss company acting for the German government has been trying to buy Turkestan cotton. If you remember we had a report from an agent about that. The other article says two things. First, the Germans are attempting to unify Russian Moslems. I doubt that will succeed and I'm not sure for what purpose the Germans want to do that.'

'To threaten India and stymie the Turks who though allies of the Germans now, they may not be in the future,' mused Rixon then indicated for McColl to continue.

'Second, that Germans based in Tiflis, Georgia, are apparently collecting information about troop billets.'

'Well that must be about Baku oil for there is no other reason for Germany to be in Georgia, there's nothing for them there. So it's even more important that we shore up the people in Baku who are anti-Turk and anti-German namely the Bolos. Using the old adage "The enemy of my enemies is my friend," in this case the Bolos become our friends. Muncerforce is intended to do that shoring up, but is there something else we could do?'

'Well I've told Meshed that we'd like them to send an intelligence agent as soon as possible to see what's happening in Baku as we've lost contact with our agent there. I believe it is easier and quicker for an agent to get to Baku from Meshed rather than Basra because much of the journey can be by rail and they don't have to meet tribes like the Jangalis en route.'

Rixon grunted his reply. 'So Muncerville is still finding the armed opposition in Persia slowing him down?' When McColl nodded Rixon snapped, 'Meshed will claim that they have nobody to send but I don't care they have to get someone to Baku, like it or not!'

'I'll send a telegram to Meshed ordering their immediate action. I'll do this before you go to the Eastern Committee meeting.'

At the meeting of the Eastern Committee everyone was reminded that the Caucasus were said to have forty-five different peoples in Baku alone. There was a history of ethnic violence and religious violence in the region because if for no other reason that was where Christian and Moslem worlds collided. The whole Caucasus situation was further exacerbated by the collapse of Imperial Russia that resulted in local peoples trying to gain political control of an area at the expense of their neighbours even though the Bolsheviks had succeeded the Imperialists in most places. The Moslems of the Caucasus however saw the Bolsheviks as being no different from their imperial predecessors—they were all Russians. General Rixon at that point mentioned the intelligence the War Office had about the Germans trying to unite the Moslems which provoked laughter, smiles and shaking of heads around the room.

General Rixon continued with the War Office's intelligence by telling the meeting that the Germans appeared to have active Georgian support for their movement east. Georgia is apparently preparing for the arrival of their co-religionists the Germans, with whom they have a historical link. The Georgians are petrified that the Turks will continue their current invasion of the country unless they have German support. We believe the Germans are already in Georgia and that their passage to the Caspian will therefore be quicker than if they had to fight their way through Georgia. Despite this intelligence, in the War Office's view the Germans would be unable to arrive at the Caspian before the Turks as they were currently too far away.

Intelligence indicated the Turkish advance towards Baku was gathering pace because the Turkish High Command, excited by the prospect of victory, were reinforcing their Caspian Army with troops withdrawn from fighting in Palestine. Meanwhile the Bolsheviks, who had seized power in Georgia in 1917, had retreated to Baku once the Turkish invasion had begun to threaten the Georgian Capital, Tiflis. The meeting then discussed who they thought would get control of Caspian oil—the Germans or Turks. The consensus was that enmity between the Turks and the Germans, over the oil, could occur and that cheered everyone up.

Rixon then reminded everyone that the Baku Bolshevik Government was controlled by an Armenian majority, by tradition the natural enemies of Moslems whether local Caucasus tribes or invading Turks. Currently exacerbating this natural state of affairs was that the Baku Armenians had recently massacred a village of local Muslims. This massacre the Armenians knew would lead them to expect harsh retribution from the advancing Muslim troops of whatever tribe or nationality if and when they captured Baku. It was to be hoped that the prospect of Muslim retribution would lead to a stiffening of resolve amongst the Armenians to defend Baku vigorously. Rixon then stated that despite its current difficulties in Persia he was confident that Muncerforce would reach Baku before the Turks and would encourage the resolve of both the Armenians and the Bolsheviks to fight.

'Thank you general,' said Foreign Secretary Arthur Ballard, 'apart from the military matters we do need to realise the importance of oil to both Germany

and Turkey. We have statistics kindly supplied by our Board of Trade. Before the war we only got about 7% of our oil from the Caucasus so in that respect the loss of Baku would not greatly affect our oil imports. However, we are increasing our oil imports at about 1,000,000 tons a year since 1915 so perhaps what I just said may be misleading. The Baku oil was exported from the Caucasus through ports on the Black Sea. One of the reasons why we wanted the Dardanelles to be open to the Russians in 1915 was to enable them to export both oil and wheat. That attempted opening failed. Currently the advance of the Germans through the Ukraine to the Black Sea will give them, with Turkey's support, control of that sea. If they control the Black Sea then they control the export of the oil from the Baku and Grozny oilfields. These Caucasus oilfields will comfortably supply all Germany's and Turkey's needs. We believe in the Foreign Office the Bolsheviks will be prepared to sell the Germans the oil they need. If the Bolsheviks do not sell oil to Germany and, or, Turkey, one or other of those countries will try and seize the fields. We cannot allow that to happen.' He looked at Rixon who was trying to get his attention.

'We must not forget that if either country gets to Baku then India is open for invasion,' Merson, said reiterating his hobby horse for the umpteenth time. He looked round, 'anything else on this subject?' Silence reigned, 'Turkestan then, Foreign Secretary?'

Arthur Ballard began, 'the Foreign Office has a report that there is an American consul in Tashkent. I have heard that he was in London before he went out to Tashkent. The stated reason, by the Americans, for him going to Tashkent is to gather information about the cotton crop. Our thoughts are that Mr Compton is there for trade purposes and that the Americans are looking to penetrate the region commercially. As far as we know they have had little trading activity in Turkestan before now. I am quite clear that this area is firmly in our sphere of activity and not only the Foreign Office but also the Board of Trade want to keep it that way and we can do without American trade competition once this war is over.'

There was a murmur of approval round the table that Ballard allowed to die down before he continued speaking. 'Now, this Compton has suggested that we and the French send someone there as well. Naturally we don't want the French anywhere near the place so we have not informed them of this suggestion. I am unsure whether the American State Department has been in contact with the French. I suspect the French are too bogged down in Europe at the moment to send someone—I certainly hope so. All I will say is this is that we send this intelligence mission, currently awaiting our final approval in Kashgar, into Tashkent if for no other reason that we must find out what the Americans are doing there.'

Merson leaned forward nodding and as soon as Ballard stopped speaking he said excitedly 'I have a proposal to make on hearing that.'

After the Eastern Committee meeting ended Lord SurrIDGE updated Grimes what he had learned that morning.

'As always we have no idea exactly what is going on in Turkestan or Trans-Caspia.' SurrIDGE shifted his pen an inch on his blotting pad before he looked back at Grimes. 'In their wisdom the War Office has just sent a telegram to

Meshed telling them to send an agent up to Baku to carry out an assessment of the situation. The feeling is that the Bolos actually won't want anyone other than themselves to hold Baku because of the oil. Quite where that leaves the Armenians is anyone's guess, except to possibly drive a wedge between them and the Bolos, and then interestingly enough that in turn might drive a wedge between our enemies and hopefully fighting one another—though that is a slim hope.'

Grimes nodded as he thought for a moment whilst gazing over Lord Surridge's head at the King's portrait then he spoke, 'did the War Office ask us, or India, for permission to send someone to Baku, my lord?'

'No. The reason given is that because of the importance of Baku oil it is seen as a Home Government issue, rather than an India Office or Indian Government issue.' Surridge grudgingly added, 'they expect India to provide the personnel to go to Baku from Meshed!'

'Still it makes it a bit confusing when Baghdad and Meshed are basically under our control and the War Office just does what it wants without asking us first.'

Lord Surridge sniffed before replying, 'Yes. One thing I was reminded of this morning was that the Bolos have control of all the warships on the Caspian Sea. So if the Bolos do wave the green flag at the Hun and if the Germans can get enough sea transports then they will be across into Trans-Caspia before you could say "Jack Robinson," and we cannot stop them. The thinking this morning is that only Germans would go east with Russian approval. The Russians wouldn't want Turks in the country at any price because of past history. So Turkey once it has captured Baku to avoid that confrontation may head down towards Tehran and Tabriz. What do you think?'

'The comment about the Russians and the Turks not liking each other is correct but it might be dangerous to assume that Turks won't go east into Russian Turkestan because they might want to set up some grand Turkic confederation stretching from the Caspian to the Chinese border.' Grimes thought for a moment, 'there is a theory though no direct evidence that some of the unrest amongst the Moslems of the old Khanates like Bokhara before the war in Turkestan may have been stimulated by the Turks. If the Russians want to hang on to Turkestan they wouldn't want the Turks invoking a religious war. I'm also sure that the Germans would not want to see the Turks too strong in Central Asia because that is where the German want to expand their trade.'

'What you have just said confirms that some of the discussions and the conclusions that we had in this morning's meeting were the right ones. It is nice to be singing from the same hymn sheet as the Foreign Office for a change.'

'Indeed, my lord.'

'The other bit of intelligence I learned this morning is that the Germans are not present in any strength in Tiflis at the moment. Our reports say they have maybe a brigade there. That is hardly enough men to be sent across to Turkestan and then onto India bearing in mind the long lines of communication. So it is doubly important that we know exactly what the

German POW numbers are in Tashkent. We need this intelligence mission to Tashkent more than ever.'

Grimes thought for several seconds, 'I suppose,' he said carefully, 'that it is possible that the Germans might just send material instead of men.'

SurrIDGE looked surprised. 'Are you now a military man?'

'There are two reasons why I think this way.' Grimes held up his forefinger 'first, obviously their POWs will not have any arms and if they are going to be the basis of an invading army then obviously they will need arms everything from rifles to artillery.' Grimes grasped his middle finger, 'second, thanks to our blockade we know that the Germans are struggling to keep their armies fully supplied in Europe so supporting this Tashkent army will be difficult and slow.'

'Grimes unfortunately we sent a lot of arms and ammunition to help our Russian friends when they were our friends. All this material apparently is still sitting where it was landed up in the north of the country near Archangel. If, Grimes, the Bolos enable the Germans to cross the Caspian then they might also allow them to take our arms sitting up in Archangel. That would really be wonderful—our own supplies being used against us.'

'Archangel is in Northern Russia, so it would not be easy to move it to the Caspian even though it is summer.'

'Between you and me Grimes there are moves afoot to go and get the stuff back and to stop it falling into German hands.'

'Sending soldiers into Russia, that sounds dangerous. The Bolos won't like it.'

'Whether we go ahead with that little job depends on our Allies and particularly the Americans. President Hickson thinks that everything we do is for the purpose of expanding the Empire. We know it is merely to protect it. Better us than the Germans.'

'Or, the French,' snapped Grimes which provoked a grin from SurrIDGE, 'I cannot believe the Germans have enough men to send into Turkestan because of their known losses on the Western front in March. As for the POWs we know they will need a lot of training before they can become an effective fighting force.'

'Agreed, I suspect, Grimes, that they'll have to have access to food first before they can be trained and where's that coming from? Newly independent, German supported, Ukraine? The Bolos are fighting to get the Ukraine back as part of Russia and if succeed, will the Germans still be allowed just to take what they want or will the Bolos try to stop them doing that?'

'I think these Bolos are only interested in power so they are prepared to leave the Germans to do what they want whilst they try and consolidate their hold on Russia. I think the Bolos grasp on power is weak and cannot possibly last much longer. But who will replace the Bolos as the government? What will the new government do about the German invasion of Russia? If it wasn't for these Bolos and Brest-Litovsk I'm sure the general Russian population would want to continue the war on our side.' Grimes shrugged, 'we wait for sense to prevail.'

SurrIDGE leaned back in his chair before he leaned forward and picked up his glasses that he twirled round and round in his hand as he thought. SurrIDGE

eyes then focused back on Grimes. 'Now what have you found out about the railway?'

'According to our intelligence from Persia, Ashkhabad is held by the SRs—the Social Revolutionaries.'

'Are they the same as the Bolos?'

'Apparently not, though I think they are very similar. Even the Foreign Office doesn't know what the difference is. Apparently the two groups join together to fight the counter revolutionaries, the so called Whites, but elsewhere they seem to fight each other.'

'The world is an absolute madhouse at the moment, Grimes. I hope, that these Whites are our answer,' he paused and reflectively looked over Grimes' head into the distance. 'People don't really like change you know- I don't. Do you, Grimes?'

'Absolutely not.'

Surrudge began to shake his head. 'As for the Foreign Office they can be so hopeless at times. It is their job to know the difference between the Bolos and the SRs. How can we tell our chaps who are going on this mission into Turkestan what to look for if we don't know one political party from another?'

'I suspect the Foreign Office is too worried about running all those crazy schemes in Moscow to think about how to differentiate these, no doubt, short lived revolutionary parties.'

'I suspect you are right about that Grimes. We are getting into a mess with Russia we really are. Could we do anything from Persia about the Russian railway?'

'There are troops in Meshed but dare we send them over the border?'

Surrudge leaned back in his chair and made a steeple with his fingers before clapping those fingers and making a hollow sound. 'I suppose not. Yet, if we are to send troops into Northern Russia then why not do so elsewhere? We would have to think it through very carefully and clear it with the committee. Must chat about it next time we meet.' Surrudge perched his glasses on his nose and looked over them at Grimes before he clapped his hands and pointed a finger and said briskly, 'at the Eastern Committee meeting this morning Lord Ballard proposed that our mission to Tashkent should go ahead as soon as the Chinese gave their permission and that was agreed. That permission came from the Chinese Embassy this afternoon,' he waved a piece of paper.

'Great news.'

Surrudge leaned forward and dropped his voice. At the meeting the cotton and the POWs were mentioned as vital for the mission to investigate. Do you know what the final decider was for the mission?' Grimes shook his head, 'the concern about this American consul in Tashkent. The Foreign Office and others are worried about the Americans setting up commercial links in the area. The mission must find out what the Yanks are up to and then we can stop them in their tracks. Surrudge sat back. 'So Grimes, we can finally say ,after weeks of waiting, this mission has the blessing of, the War Office, the Prime Minister, the Foreign Office, The Board of Trade and us. Action at last my good fellow, action at last.'

Chapter 24

The Chinese general met Robbins and Edrich at his headquarters in the new part of the town wearing a bright blue uniform with enormous epaulettes. He was much taller than Edrich expected being well over six feet in height with a stomach that stretched his dress coat to bursting point. His teeth were bucked and he had a caste in his eye that made it difficult to see which way he was looking. Wong looked to Edrich like a character straight out of a Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera and half expected him to burst into song. The general led the initial discussion of everyone's health; the weather; and Kashgar social life with the emphasis clearly on him personally as well as his role as military governor. After what seemed an interminable time the general slid into business matters.

'You are a British Officer, Colonel Edrich, who I understand from Sir Walter, has been wounded fighting both the Turks and the Germans.' Edrich opened his mouth to reply but Wong beat him to it. 'I have been wounded several times but I have the strength of a bear and have always recovered. However, the people who gave me the wounds are all dead, Colonel Edrich. And I killed them literally with my own hands.' Wong held his hands out and made a strangling motion with them. He looked at Edrich with a malicious grin, 'did you kill the people who wounded you, colonel?'

'No, Excellency, I was wounded by shrapnel fired by a cannon situated far beyond where I could see those who had fired the shot.'

'A very de-personalised way of fighting—if I may say so.'

'When there are millions of men involved Excellency I think that is bound to happen.'

The Tao-toi nodded before replying, 'so you are a military man taking over as consul from Sir Walter, a non military man.' He turned to look at Sir Walter, 'why is that?'

Sir Walter cleared his throat, 'in the India we give the opportunity to our most gifted military officers, like Colonel Edrich, the opportunity to change direction and concentrate on political matters. Such men serve as consuls to those parts within India not directly under our control and in other countries who like to have British consuls present.'

'Why?' the Tao-toi interrupted.

'We are seen as being impartial in matters on which we can help a country's government whether local or central to make balanced decisions,' replied Robbins.

'These balanced decisions obviously favour what Great Britain wants, wouldn't you say? And,' the Tao-toi added quickly, 'do countries really like a British presence or is it foisted upon them?'

'Excellency, if we make decisions biased towards Great Britain then the governments involved would quickly get rid of us. As to the other point, as we

have discussed many times before, we like to represent His Majesty's subjects' interests to the local government by speaking with one voice.'

The Tao-toi switched his gaze to Edrich and stared at him for a few moments. 'Being a military man would you say that Sinkiang is vulnerable to invasion, Colonel Edrich?'

'Not from the south. Neither India nor the British Home Government, as I understand it, would attempt to invade China because of the friendly relations between the nations and, of course, the formidable qualities of Chinese soldiers and their leaders. Now from Russia I cannot say. Perhaps when and if our mission goes ahead I would be able to comment on that possibility.'

Edrich glanced over at Robbins who took this as a cue to add, 'our Government is aware of the delicacy of the situation in Turkestan and how it affects the adjoining countries, if one of those countries' governments did not give its approval then the mission would be unable to go ahead. If that had happened then I would have to return to England via India with the two military officers who are on the way to join us in Kashgar. Colonel Edrich replaces me here.'

'The Russians are your allies are they not? Could you be helping them, Colonel Edrich, to plan an invasion of Sinkiang?'

'Certainly not, Excellency, our intention is merely to find out the state of affairs in Tashkent because we believe there are many Germans there and they are our enemies.'

'You believe these Germans perhaps will try to come to or through Sinkiang?'

'We do not know that but I am sure his Excellency would stop them.'

The Tao-toi said nothing more about the mission but instead invited the whole British Mission to dinner as soon as the rest of the party arrived in Kashgar. As they left the governor's residence Robbins said that he would bet five pounds that the Tao-toi would ask exactly the same questions of Washbrook and Hutton as he had asked today; Edrich decided not to take the bet.

Chapter 25

Captain Fernee smoothed his uniform prior to meeting the commanding officer of the Meshed garrison. Standing straight he knocked on Brigadier General Barber's office door and marched smartly into the room when commanded. Barber had arrived in Meshed from India after what was the most uncomfortable and terrible journey of his long and, as he felt, distinguished career. The journey's impact on his mood he quickly demonstrated. 'Come in sit down man. You must be Captain Fernee. What have you found out about those Jewish Russian Bolsheviks claiming to be merchants from Moscow trading round this district?' Fernee's backside had not yet reached the chair, 'come on I haven't got all day.'

'I am Captain Fernee.'

'I've already said you were. There is no need to repeat everything I say or to state the obvious.'

Ferneer was just about to say 'no sir,' but said instead, 'Six of the Russians seem to have disappeared into the surrounding countryside.'

'Where man, where?'

'I don't know, sir. None of our agents have come up with either hide or hair of them. So I have instructed all of our agents to keep looking for the blighters and to let us know when and where they surface.'

'Well I was hoping for something different from you considering your background. You have had several weeks here—I hope you have not been idle. Have you done better with the other two Russians?'

'I think so, sir.'

Barber interrupted. 'You think? Don't you know?'

'Sorry, yes sir.'

'Come on then, yes, what.'

'The other two we found at Kuchan had had the opportunity to buy grain and raisins from a grain merchant, Manukian, who is actually one of our agents.'

'I know that. He's an Armenian, capital chap.' Barber did not actually know Manukian but he had been briefed by Statham about the various British agents in the surrounding towns. Barber was merely stating to Ferneer what Statham felt about Manukian. 'And?'

'Well it seemed that these men, claiming to be grain merchants, were not interested in buying cereal from him or anyone else. They have actually hired a warehouse to which they have already made changes—like putting in a stone floor. Manukian reliably tells me that you would not need a stone floor to store grain.'

'Agreed,' said Barber though he had no idea why you would not store grain on a stone floor but he'd try and remember to ask someone.

'The rumour is that the place is to hold soldiers. I sneaked a look and it certainly could act as a barracks. I then bearded the Russians about what they were going to hold in the place; I even suggested that it might be men. The chap I talked to looked very shifty eyed.'

'Jews are invariably shifty. It comes with being in trade, Ferneer.'

'Really, sir? The Russians, I'm not sure they were Jewish, seem to feign surprise that anyone would want to hold men in the warehouse; they insisted they would be buying lots of different things in the future and a stone floor is more adaptable than an earth or wooden floor. The other thing we found out, though you may know this already is that our Governor, here in Meshed, is pro-British but Kuchan's governor is pro-Turkish and the two men don't like each other. Kuchan could therefore be used as a staging post for Turkish or German troops on their way to invade India, just because of personality.'

'The Kuchan's governor's got Beady eyes apparently. Never trust a man with beady eyes, Ferneer. I knew about him but I like to get confirmation—that way I keep you on your toes.'

Ferneer paused, expecting Barber to continue but when that was unforthcoming he took the plunge. 'I was thinking sir on my journey back to Meshed. These Russian merchants claim to have come from Moscow via Baku

so they must either have Bolshevik support or, actually be Bolos. I was wondering if I should go to Baku and see what the form is on these Bolshevik merchants.' Fernee thought that a mission to Baku more exciting and more fun than producing the latest edition of the local intelligence newsletter, which was his task for that afternoon.

'Form is a horse racing term isn't it? Are you a gambler?' Barber looked mystified.

Fernee thought, what either of those things has got to do with the conversation. 'Never bet in my life, sir—it is just an expression perhaps I should have said "find out the facts".'

'Exactly, captain.'

'Right, sir. I thought that in Baku I could discover whether the Bolsheviks just want to cause trouble down here in Meshed either for their revolution purposes or as agents of the Germans. Maybe I could cause them some trouble when I'm there.' Fernee hoped that Barber would not ask him what form that trouble might take as he realised he had spoken before he had thought about it.

Barber sat silent for a moment then stirred himself. 'You must be clairvoyant, Fernee. Today I got a telegram from the Mesopotamia Intelligence office in Basra asking us to send a Russian speaking officer to Baku. It seems the Foreign Office have a chap up in the Caucasus but have lost contact with him because of the fighting. Then the War Office thinks that they should have their own agent in Baku because they can't always rely on the Foreign Office for adequate military information. If someone went from here communication might be easier. It was India's idea to send Major Travis' on an intelligence trip journey to Krasnovodsk whilst I was on my way here from Simla. I could order Travis to cross the Caspian and go to Baku but I don't want the War Office and India embroiled in a boundary dispute of "who is working for whom." I also want to hear directly what Travis has learned at Krasnovodsk therefore you will go to Baku to find out all you can and more—I said that because I expect my officers to exceed expectations. You mentioned trouble, what trouble were you thinking of causing?'

'I thought I'd take Captain Mawle with me, he's an explosives expert. Maybe if our enemies are going to invade Persia they might use the Russian railway for transport. I thought we could blow up some of the railway lines or a few bridges something like that. Apparently that is what our chaps are doing in Arabia and it is causing the Turks problems, so why not do the same in Russia?'

'I am going to ask Simla about this,' Barber waved the telegram in the air. 'If I did what the War Office wanted without telling India, the latter would have my guts for garters. I think I will set in motion what the War Office wants and await India's approval. Those two departments can battle things out over who controls what and whom.' Barber stared over Fernee's head then, 'sending you to Baku is a good idea, I'll suggest to Simla that you take Mawle with you over the border to find intelligence on the railway—places where it could be blown up, that sort of thing—in case our enemy uses that mode of transport in its threat to India. Simla will probably approve my suggestions of sending the two of you because it's me who is recommending this. I suggest therefore you start

planning what you need to do whether Mawle accompanies you or not. Be prepared to go to Baku immediately I hear from India, Captain Fernby.'

'It's Captain Fernee, sir.'

'That's exactly what I said. Close the door quietly as you go out.'

Chapter 26

'I thought we were running the war from India not the damn War Office, Routledge! They should not be sending telegrams to Mesopotamia asking them to ask Meshed to send someone to Baku, should they? They should ask us first,' General Harris shouted.

Routledge pursed his lips before replying. 'The Caucasus and Caspian are in the Foreign Office's sphere of influence, sir; they probably forgot that General Barber is under our command.'

'I doubt that. As Barber got the request from the War Office we can hardly say no, can we?' Harris slammed the telegram on his desk. 'What about sending this Mawle, to blow up the Russian railway?'

'Originally London sent Mawle out here to go on to Persia, sir. Whilst he waited to go to Persia we started using him as an intelligence officer as we were short of staff. The strange thing is he came out via Canada and India rather than via Suez. Apparently he is an explosives expert so the War Office must have already thought about this Russian jaunt months ago. I assume they did not want to tell us too much because his role is secret. When he was here I asked him why he was going to Persia and he told me that he was going to blow up the Russian railway when ordered to do so by the War Office.'

'You never told me this, why not?'

'He was under orders from the War Office who told him to keep quiet. I thought it best to leave him alone as we are under Simla. I suspect Mawle has already told Barber the real reason for his being in Meshed. The request to send Fernee to Baku perhaps is merely London using this trip as a cover for Mawle's covert activity against the railway.'

Harris looked exasperated and shook his head. 'All this secrecy and then one department doing this and another department doing that; nobody talks to anybody till after whatever is done, is done. Beats me how we are meant to win the war. So if we allow, or support, Mawle to go then he goes under our authority not the War Office's.'

'Can we justify that?'

Harris smiled, 'the railway that Mawle is to blow up is in Turkestan and Turkistan is in India's sphere of influence. Is that not right?' Routledge wagged his head. 'So that gives India control. Do we let Mawle go with Fernee and let him take explosives?'

'Because Mawle is only a captain we can't risk him creating a conflagration with the Bolsheviks all on his own. So Barber must have the final word on any explosive activity that Mawle undertakes. I think Fernee is capable of

identifying potential rail and bridge targets as part of his intelligence mission. I suggest it is too early for Mawle to accompany him so we keep this mission small and low key. If Fernee finds on his mission that the Huns or the Turks are ready to cross the Caspian on their way to invade India then Barber can always order Mawle to blow up the railway—that makes such a mission military.'

'I agree we have to trust Barber's judgement based on Fernee's intelligence from Baku. I think you must make this clear when you telegraph our approval to send only Fernee to Baku.'

Chapter 27

Mawle and Fernee sat outside Barber's office listening to the man shouting at Statham. From what they could hear it was a discussion about accounts.

'Well at least we are going to be out of earshot and away from General Grumpy,' said Fernee.

Mawle laughed, 'you think so?'

'I was told by his Nibbs yesterday, that I was to go on a jaunt to Baku. Now I knew you wanted to go into Russia to blow things up so I suggested you come with me.'

'Thank you, Tom. I thought that I had made a wrong decision by volunteering to come out here seeing I've been sitting idle ever since my arrival.'

'Volunteer to come out? Didn't London send you out here specifically to blow something up?'

Mawle leaned forward in his chair and looked at Barber's secretary typing. Keeping his eye on the man Mawle spoke out of the side of his mouth. 'No. I volunteered through a chap, I know in London. We were both in intelligence. I was working on maps at the time and him on matters Russian. We were talking, one day, about the possibility that the Turks or Germans might use the Russian railway to invade Persia and then India. We then discussed how some of our chaps in Arabia are having great fun blowing up the railway and being involved in guerrilla war against the Turks. At sometime I said that blowing things up sounded more fun than working in an office in Whitehall on Indian intelligence matters. My friend, God Bless Him, got me this posting.'

'Working in an office in Whitehall? Why would they want you, an explosives expert, in the Indian Intelligence department in Whitehall doing maps?'

'Well I did serve for a while on the North West Frontier before I was in London, so I know about India. I'm not actually an explosives expert, Tom.'

'I thought all you Australian civil engineers were dab hands at blowing up mountains to build roads or railways.'

'No, I have never used the stuff. I have never had to.'

Their conversation was interrupted by the office door being wrenched open and as the two captains leapt to their feet. Both men were surprised to see that Barber rather than Statham had opened the door.

'In here now.' Barber didn't bother to return the salutes of either man merely strode back into the room and sat heavily at his desk from where he barked, 'I hope you are packed for Baku, Captain Fernee.' Barber switched his attention to Mawle and said brusquely, 'I am sorry but at this time Captain Mawle you are not going. However, whilst Fernee is away you must be ready to move into Russia with your explosives at a moment's notice. Now I need to talk to Fernee alone if you please.'

Fernee watched a rather forlorn Mawle disappear out through the door and once the door closed Barber asked Fernee to describe his approach to the Baku trip.

'I'll enter Russian Turkestan disguised as a Persian Armenian trader. I will take the two Muslim Indians who accompanied me, as my servants, from India. Both my servants speak Farsi and are capable of passing themselves off as Persians.'

Barber listened intently, and at the end he gave Fernee his orders and instructions. Fernee was: told to contact Major Travis in Krasnovodsk who would give final approval on whether it was too dangerous for Fernee to, proceed to Baku; given letters addressed to known anti-Bolsheviks in Krasnovodsk and Baku; given funds for his trip. The funds provided were to cover not just Fernee's travel expenses but money for any bribes that he might have make on his journey.

Fernee decided to take no chances with the money being discovered by the Bolshevik guards when he crossed the Turkestan border and had one of his Indian servants, Ali Baig, sew some of the money into the lining of his coat. The larger amount of money Fernee stored in one of the three canvas water bags that he habitually carried with him. Fernee took this decision having been assured that the terrain his party would be travelling through had a good supply of water and that taking three water bags was overkill.

It took three days travel for Fernee and his party to reach the Persian border at the village of Khakistar. Whilst the Fernee party were resting their horses prior to crossing the border into Russia a British Officer came riding in the opposite direction; it was Travis. Travis had only reached Ashkhabad not Krasnovodsk but because of what he had learnt there he was anxious to report back immediately to Meshed. Travis told Fernee the Bolsheviks were worried by the presence of twenty thousand British troops in Meshed who were expected to invade Russia at any moment. Travis said had not disabused the Bolsheviks as to the true number (several hundred) of troops in Meshed but he had told them they were there only for friendly not aggressive purposes.

Travis had met a local Bolshevik government minister who was non-committal about what was happening to the abundant cotton stocks in Ashkhabad. The Bolshevik was prepared to admit the Germans were interested in buying the whole stock. Travis was then warned by the Bolshevik that he would be in danger if he did not leave post haste because there were Turkish agents in the town bent on persuading the local Moslems to support Turkey against the British. Those agents might take the opportunity to kill a known British Officer. Travis' advice, but not an order, was for Fernee to turn back to Meshed.

Ferneer felt confident in his Persian disguise and his Russian linguistic abilities to ignore Travis' warning about the dangers he faced in Ashkhabad. Travis looked like a British Officer, Ferneer did not and because of that Travis decided it was up to Ferneer to decide whether to accept his advice. Ferneer was too excited by his mission to want a return to Meshed just to: edit a newspaper; draw a map; listen to Barber. He told Travis he was going on to Baku and noticing that Travis did not have a servant Ferneer gave him one of his. Ferneer then left Travis and crossed the Russian border with his remaining servant, Ali Baig, and headed for the railway station at Kaahka.

Chapter 28

Washbrook and Hutton surprised Edrich by arriving together in Kashgar. Edrich and Robbins watched from the window of Robbins' office as the two British officers entered the Residency. Washbrook was under his own power, but Hutton was in a litter slung between two horses.

'I bet I know which one is Hutton, Bill.' Robbins glanced at Edrich who merely raised his eyebrows and went and sat in a chair by the desk. Robbins rang his bell and gave orders to his servant to have the man in the litter taken to a small bedroom straight away and to bring the fit officer to his office at once. Robbins then sat down at his desk and joined Edrich waiting in silence. A few moments later the door opened to admit a fit and, to Edrich's eyes, a disgustingly healthy looking and smart Washbrook. Edrich stood and returned Washbrook salute.

'Good afternoon, Major Washbrook, may I introduce Sir Walter Robbins the British Consul here in Kashgar.'

Washbrook first saluted Robbins and then when the latter proffered his hand he shook it.

'You look disgustingly fit, Major Washbrook,' Edrich said jovially.

'If you say so colonel,' Washbrook responded looking at Robbins.

The journey up had not improved him thought Edrich but he forced himself to maintain his joviality. 'So Hutton, what seems to be the matter with him, fall off his motorcycle?'

'No, if you recall, colonel, Captain Hutton was not very well when we were in Srinagar. He got to Gilgit fine on his intrepid machine but he seems to have got some sort of complaint on the journey across the Pamirs, which developed into a fever. As a result he couldn't travel for several days and so when my party caught up with his six days ago we organised a litter and made all speed for here. In addition his bad back has also given him pain almost continually.' Washbrook shifted his gaze to Robbins and changed his tone, Edrich felt, to one of obsequiousness 'is there a doctor who could have a look at him, Sir Walter?'

Edrich spoke before Robbins had a chance to reply, 'I'm sure that if there is a doctor here Sir Walter will organise a visit from him, won't you Sir Walter?'

Robbins felt the tension and merely nodded at Edrich who then asked, 'did you have any problems on the road?'

'Such as what?' Washbrook looked puzzled.

The man is obviously just trying to be difficult thought Edrich. 'Problems with the Chinese authorities, sniped at by bandits, attacked by giant lizards or birds, basically, major, anything that hindered your progress up here. Is it too hard for you to imagine what a problem is?' Edrich felt furious that he let himself get sarcastic. Sarcasm aimed at a subordinate would not impress Sir Walter.

Washbrook flushed. 'No problems except Captain Hutton's illness. Do we have any news on the mission?' Washbrook gaze flickered between the two men in front of him.

'No. As soon as I know you'll know,' Edrich spoke perfunctorily. 'Now you must be tired. I suggest that you use the rest of the day to get the lie of the land. We can discuss matters over dinner tonight. I know there is the traditional ban on discussing business in the mess but I think we can make an exception for this evening. Do you not agree, Sir Walter?'

'Yes, colonel,' Robbins wanted to say, "This is a consulate not an army mess," but he decided now was not the appropriate time to correct Edrich.

'Thank you. I will go and visit Captain Hutton in a moment.'

'You won't forget the doctor, sir?' Washbrook bleated at Robbins.

'Of course not, major.'

Edrich watched Washbrook exit the office and then glared at the door before he turned his attention to Robbins who was looking at him with pursed lips. Edrich felt himself flush. Robbins broke the silence.

'There seems to be tension between the two of you, colonel.' Robbins raised his hand and waved it at Edrich, 'don't worry managing people I know is difficult.' Robbins then picked up and rang his hand bell to summon a servant. 'We're in luck we've got a Russian doctor, on the run from the Bolos, staying with the Swedish missionaries. In normal circumstances it would be a local medicine man that would probably make Hutton drink snake's blood. That I don't recommend.'

Hutton was in bed with blankets tucked up to his ears when Edrich arrived but immediately sat up on the latter's entry. Hutton's face glowed so red that it reminded Edrich of a setting sun and it looked uncomfortable.

Hutton forced a smile that caused him to wince and stated the obvious, 'somehow I got too much sun, sir. I forgot that even though we were high up in the mountains that the sun still does damage.'

'God, Hutton, you are an experienced enough old hand not to get caught by the sun. You look like a Red Indian,' Edrich pointed at the man's face and then began to wonder if he should sketch Hutton as he now was. Edrich smiled to himself because he knew what he would call it, "Red face gives a warning". Edrich sat on a chair besides Hutton's bed leaned forward and resting his elbows on his knees and his chin on his hands he spoke solicitously. 'What about your back? I need to know because when we get permission from India to go to Tashkent we will move straight away. We are hoping to hear from India on any day now. So,' Edrich drawled the last word, 'will you be fit to travel with

us? If not, then I am afraid that I will have no compunction in leaving you behind. Is that clear?’

Hutton sighed, ‘yes, totally clear. I think the back is getting better slowly and I expect to be over this fever soon. I don’t want to let you down, sir.’ Hutton looked so forlornly at Edrich that he felt sorry for the man.

‘I’m sure of that, Hutton, old chap.’ Edrich only just stopped himself patting the man on the shoulder as he would a child. ‘Sir Walter has sent for a Russian doctor rather than the local medicine man so at least you won’t have to drink snake blood.’ Edrich laughed as did Hutton until his face reminded him that it was burnt. ‘He should be here soon. Just get well.’ Edrich stood and as he left the room he turned and smiled encouragement at the sick man; I wish I had got paint that colour he thought as he closed the door behind him.

Edrich was touching up his view of the Tien-shan Mountains when the Russian doctor, with Bedi as translator, came to see him. The doctor told Edrich that he thought that Hutton’s fever had been brought on as much by his general weakness as by the sun but he was convinced that the man would be fine following two days of bed rest. When Edrich asked the doctor about Hutton’s back the doctor shrugged and said, ‘a bad back is a bad back and there’s nothing I can do about that. Captain Hutton told me his back does seem to be getting better slowly.’ The doctor thought for a moment, ‘and I have to accept that.’

Chapter 29

According to Travis Fernee and Baig could catch a train for Ashkhabad the same day that they crossed the Russian border. The scheduled train did not arrive so the pair had to spend an uncomfortable night sleeping in Kaaka station. Fernee kept his water bag containing the money firmly entwined around his neck. When the train arrived, over a day late, it was crowded with: Bolshevik soldiers; Persian traders; Cossacks; Kirghiz; Armenians and surprisingly young women in fashionable dress. Fernee was able to obtain a window seat and as the train chugged on its four-hour journey to Ashkhabad he made a mental note of any bridge or culvert where Mawle could place an explosive charge to cause the maximum damage.

As the time passed Fernee noticed his fellow passengers begin to eat food they had brought with them and that made him hungry. When the train pulled into Ashkhabad he left his seat and went in search of food. Whilst his food search in the railway station was in vain it did serve a different purpose to Fernee’s advantage. As Fernee prowled the platform a detachment of Bolshevik soldiers boarded the train and took great delight in upsetting the passengers who had remained on board. The soldiers turfed people out of their seats, aggressively questioned others and then boyishly amused themselves by throwing people’s luggage about. Fernee remained on the platform out of the way watching these happenings and only boarded the train as it was leaving

the station when he found that the soldiers had quietened down and his seat had remained free. As the train continued to Krasnovodsk Fernee kept a lookout for the huge bridge that Mawle had told him existed on the line which, he intended to blow up, but Fernee saw neither hide nor hair of it.

The train arrived at Krasnovodsk late at night which forced Fernee and Baig to again sleep on the railway station's floor without having eaten. In the morning the starving pair scoured the town for food but to no avail. So in the expectation that Baku might have some of that precious commodity Fernee booked the pair tickets on a steamer leaving for Baku that afternoon. Fernee also bought vouchers that would enable them both to eat on the ship. Whilst waiting for the ship to sail Fernee delivered two of Barber's letters to reliable addresses but neither had anybody at home so any chance of being given some food evaporated. However once on board the ship Baig and Fernee's hunger was dissipated not by a meal, because the ship had no food, but by a terrible storm that made them both seasick.

On arrival at Baku the following morning the two men ran to the Europe Hotel where Major McWilliam, the British Agent, was known to appear daily around lunch time. Fernee took the opportunity, before the agent's scheduled appearance, to bathe and shave in one of the hotel rooms before he and Baig ate two large breakfasts each. McWilliam appeared just before noon and was relieved to meet Fernee. McWilliam's relief was because of his inability to get information to any British base about the current situation. The reason was that the telegraph lines were down and the town was cut off from the rest of the Caucasus by enemy troops. McWilliam told Fernee that he wanted the following information to get to Meshed as fast as possible indeed he felt that Fernee should return to Krasnovodsk by the afternoon ship. With the previous evenings storms and two breakfasts inside him the prospect of crossing the Caspian again filled Fernee with trepidation. However once he heard the following report Fernee realised his stomach would have to put up with the situation and that he needed to act with the utmost speed.

According to McWilliam's report:

The Turks were about forty miles from Baku opposing them were the remnants of the former Russian Imperial Caucasian army, who were crumbling fast;

That there were five different governing bodies in Baku;

Two of the governing bodies, the Armenians and the anti-Bolsheviks were for continuing the fight against the Turkish invaders. General Muncerville's help would be welcomed by them;

Another two of the governing bodies—the Bolsheviks and the Caspian Fleet—were opposed to fighting the Turks and currently opposed to receiving Muncerville's help. On the last point McWilliam was adamant that he would be able persuade these two bodies to change their minds and accept British military help particularly the closer the Turkish forces got to Baku. This help he was promising however needed General Muncerville's Muncerforce to overcome the Jangali tribe's resistance first, then get to Enzeli, and finally find some ships and sail to Baku;

The fifth of the governing bodies—the Centro-Caspian a mixture of all the local Muslim tribes was undecided as to what action should be undertaken against the Turks;

He had some concerns about the cotton held in Krasnovodsk being bought by the Germans but he had no information as to the situation.

No ship left Baku in the afternoon that Fernee had his meeting with McWilliam so he and Baig each found a proper bed for the night, ate a full dinner, slept well and bought provisions for their ship journey. As luck would have it the Caspian was as smooth for their return as it had been rough on the outward voyage so they were able to eat the food they had bought in Baku. When the ship docked in Krasnovodsk harbour the passengers, as they disembarked were swamped by friends, relatives and even strangers all of whom were anxious for news about conditions in Baku and also the whereabouts of the Turkish army. In this melee of people Fernee and Baig slipped ashore unnoticed by the Bolshevik police.

Fernee decided that despite the need to return to Meshed as soon as possible, he needed to stay a day in Krasnovodsk to discover what he could about the cotton. Remembering the addresses of the two letters he had delivered a few days before, he visited them again. The first address belonged to a doctor who offered Fernee a bed for that evening that he gratefully accepted. Baig on the other hand volunteered to book train tickets on the morrow's evening train, wander the streets to pick up any information he could and then sleep on the station floor.

Fernee left his luggage at the doctor's house and then went to see the second letter's recipient, Kutznikoff. Kutznikoff wanted a summation of what was happening in Baku and then asked what Fernee was doing in Krasnovodsk.

'Frankly Mr Kutznikoff I am also here to discover exactly what the situation is with regards to the cotton stocks in the town. Can you tell me what you know about the cotton and have the Germans been buying it?'

Kutznikoff smiled and nodded. 'I know that some cotton was bought by the German Mission over in Ashkhabad but I don't know how much. I can tell you my company is involved in transporting cotton across the Caspian to Astrakhan though where it goes from there I don't know. There are three ships, two of them our company's, currently alongside the docks here, loading cotton. There are also two other ships anchored out in the roads waiting to come alongside when dock space becomes free, to load cotton. Other ships are expected over the next few days to arrive here and also load cotton. The whole town here is chock-a block with cotton and even more is arriving from Ashkhabad all the time.'

'How much cotton would you say there is in the town?'

'Already loaded and on the dock I would think about fifteen to twenty thousand tons. I understand that if the railway sidings here are not yet full of cotton, they will be by the end of today.'

Fernee looked worried as he sat back in his seat thought for a moment then said. 'It is absolutely vital for the war effort that the Germans do not receive the cotton.'

'Why is cotton so important now?'

'You are aware cotton is used for making bullets and shells for example.'

'I am in cotton shipping and I know what it is used for, I am not stupid.'

'I know that. The history of cotton in this war is that Britain had to stop Germany getting cotton from America. Our ships blockaded Germany to stop the importation of cotton but some got through. Now America is in the war against Germany, the Germans can't get cotton from them. The only possible cotton source is from Russia who is no longer at war with Germany. We have to stop the Germans both buying the cotton from their allies the Bolsheviks and then transporting it to Germany.'

'Captain Fernee, I don't support these Bolos who signed the treaty which took Russia out of the war. I still want to see Germany and Turkey defeated. Indeed, I see it is my duty to work to that end because patriotic Russians do not want the Germans and especially the Turks here.' He grimaced as he thought. 'The ships now loading, at the dock, are expected on completion to weigh anchor possibly tonight but more likely in the morning. I'm sure there is something we can do—but what?' He spread his hands in a gesture of resignation. He stood up and began to talk out loud to himself as he paced the room. 'We need to delay loading the ships that are alongside somehow. If we could do that that then that would have a ripple effect, on the waiting ships and the train movement from Ashkhabad.' Kutznikoff eyes darted about as he thought.

Fernee then began to see the dawning of a thought on Kutznikoff's face. A mischievous grin slowly gathered momentum as it began at the mouth until it spanned from ear to ear and forehead to chin. Then suddenly the Russian's face became cloudy and then brightened again. Kutznikoff returned to his chair, put his elbows on the desk, and dropped his voice to a whisper so that Fernee had to lean forward to catch what the Russian was saying.

'I have a plan but it will need help from another man. Would you care if I brought someone else in?'

'Couldn't I be your help? Do you trust this man?'

Kutznikoff shook his head. 'No you can't. Yes with my life.'

'I think,' said Fernee, 'I have to have faith on your judgement. So what is the plan?'

'I need some money for bribes, have you got some?'

Fernee had given most of his money to McWilliam but he had kept some back for an emergency and was thankful that he had. 'Yes I have some, but it is all in Imperial notes.'

'They will do. Before I discuss my idea I should say what I see as its biggest problem. The problem is if we are to stop the movement of cotton to Astrakhan from Krasnovodsk then both places will know very quickly what has happened. The Bolos will be angry and they will want to know the reason for what has happened. If they do not accept the reason then,' Kutznikoff looked at Fernee and drew his fingers across his throat. 'Now I have a friend who works in the wireless station here. He is one of the few people now working there who is not a Bolshevik. The Bolos in their wisdom dismissed nearly all the old staff at the station on,' he laughed, 'ideological grounds. They found however that they needed to keep some technical specialists and my friend is one of them, in fact

he is the key technician in the place. My friend usually visits me on most days. What I'll do to ensure he comes today is to send a message asking him to come to the office as soon as he can. Coming to my office will give the visit an aura of official business and offers him some protection. In the meantime, until he arrives it is perhaps best that you wait in my outer office rather than go wondering through the town.' He paused for a moment, 'I have just had another thought. I am going to tell my secretary that you are someone looking for employment on one of the ships anchored outside the town and that my friend will radio them to see if they have a vacancy for you. That way your presence here will not raise suspicion. In the meantime I will write the message that will be sent to the Krasnovodsk Bolshevik Committee.'

A man arrived whilst Fernee was drinking his third cup of tea and went straight into Kutznikoff's office and closed the door. A few moments later the door opened and Fernee was invited in and introduced to the man—the wireless technician Yegerov. Yegerov shook Fernee's hand warmly and displayed not an ounce of surprise as to who he was. Yegerov then sat and listened patiently and without emotion to Kutznikoff's plan and his role in it.

With a smile and a nod of approval Yegerov spoke. 'I like it Igor. Simple, which is always good, and I think it will be effective. I know a chap who for a small sum of money will ensure that the station's wireless breaks down immediately after we receive the message.' He snorted in amusement, 'actually the wireless is continually breaking down and we spend more time mending it than actually transmitting. We are always asking for spare parts from the Soviets which sometimes take days to get. So engineering a wireless breakdown is the easy part.'

'Can you trust this other man?' interrupted Fernee aware that the more people who knew about the plan the more likely it would be discovered.

'He likes money but he'll help because he doesn't like the Bolos. He only works for the Bolos because like us all he needs a regular wage. No he won't betray us. Now the message?'

Kutznikoff passed the message over to Yegerov. Yegerov laughed out loud in one or two places as he read the message. When he had finished reading it he asked for a clean sheet of paper and thoughtfully wrote on it referring all the while to the original document.

'This is good,' Yegerov said waving the original message before he tore into little pieces much to the others' surprise. Yegerov saw their looks and waved his own piece of paper. 'Don't worry all I have done is to rewrite your message in the form that the Soviet Executive Committee in Astrakhan would use. I know how they do this because I see messages from the Committee all the time. This must look official if we are to succeed. Take a look.' Yegerov passed his message version to Kutznikoff whom after reading it handed it silently to Fernee to read.

From: The Soviet Executive Committee Astrakhan

To: The Soviet Committee Krasnovodsk.

All ships at anchor in the approaches to Krasnovodsk or approaching that port are ordered immediately to prepare their ships to transport oil from Baku to Astrakhan. All ships must sail immediately for Baku.

The three ships in Krasnovodsk harbour currently loading cotton are ordered to be unloaded and are to put to sea immediately and proceed with all speed to Martovsk. They must dock at Martovsk immediately on arrival.

Kutznikoff watched Fernee study the message and noted with pleasure the Englishman's smile of approval when returned the paper to Yegerov.

'Why, Mr Yegerov, did you add the part about the movement of oil?' Fernee asked.

Yegerov replied, 'moving the ships to Martovsk without any explanation might be questioned by the Bolos here. However I am aware that the Krasnovodsk Soviet Committee knows that Astrakhan is short of oil. Indeed I believe our Soviet is expecting to receive a message about transporting oil to Astrakhan anyway. So I think our Soviet here will not raise any questions on moving the oil and therefore they will also accept, without question, the message relating to Martovsk.'

'Why not get all the ships to get ready for oil? Why send the three to dock in Martovsk?' Fernee asked.

'Well several reasons. The Astrakhan Soviet often sends messages containing abrupt orders without explanation. Then I thought dispersing the ships round the Caspian might be useful. It would take some time to get them back here.' Yegerov then grinned, 'finally I thought that if I sent the ships to Martovsk the Soviet here might think that the ships were being sent there to rescue the local Bolos from the Germans who are I understand approaching that town. That might cause our Bolos here to panic about their own fate if the Germans arrive and therefore they might not think too much about the validity of the order.'

Fernee shook his head in wonderment. 'That is fantastic. What will happen when the ships get to Martovsk though?' Fernee asked to which Yegerov replied with a shrug and a smile that bordered on a grimace.

'I think the more important question, Captain Fernee, is what Astrakhan will do when they learn what has happened,' said Kutznikoff who then switched his gaze questioningly at Yegerov.

'God knows. I am sure it will not be pleasant,' said Yegerov looking worried. 'These Bolos treat people worse than the Tsar and his Cossacks.'

'So I understand.' Fernee then added emphatically, 'if you need to, Mr Yegerov, you can if you wish escape to Persia and we will look after you. That is a promise. Then when the Bolos fall from power you can come back here.'

'Thank you.' He held his hand out, into which Fernee plonked a bundle of Imperial Russian Bank notes. Yegerov quickly looked through the pile, split them into two and put each half into a different pocket. Yegerov then stood, nodded at Fernee and Kutznikoff, strode out of the office before his footsteps could be heard clattering down the stairs.

About an hour after Yegerov had left the shipping company offices and whilst Fernee was reading a local newspaper in an empty adjacent office to Kutznikoff's office he heard the clattering of boots on the building's wooden floors. Through the open door of the office where he was sitting Fernee saw a flushed and sweating man with a revolver visible in his trousers' waist stride into the outer office. The man marched without a word past Kutznikoff's

cowering secretary. Fernee watched the man wrench open Kutznikoff's inner office door without knocking and burst in unannounced. Fernee heard Kutznikoff begin to greet the man but he was cut off in mid speech. The stranger told Kutznikoff in a loud threatening manner that he wasn't there for his health and that he had an order from the Soviet Committee that Kutznikoff must act on immediately. Fernee then heard an envelope being torn and after a moment Kutznikoff protesting in a loud voice about the message's contents, which considering he had written the original, made Fernee smile.

The Bolshevik stopped Kutznikoff with a few shouted oaths that threatened him dire punishment if the order was not carried out directly. Next Kutznikoff appeared at his office door looking cowed before with great deference he ushered the Bolo, whose face was fixed in a scowl, into the outer office. The Bolo without gazing to the right or left marched to the office entrance with Kutznikoff trailing behind. At the door both men stopped where under the ferocious gaze of the Bolo, Kutznikoff turned and told his secretary to get all the ships captains currently loading cotton at the dock to come and see him immediately. Even before Kutznikoff had finished giving his secretary her orders the Bolo was stomping away down the corridor.

'But why Martovsk, comrade? Will I have a cargo to pick up?' Kutznikoff called timidly after the departing Bolo.

Fernee heard the Bolo's shouted reply come down the corridor. 'Just do as you are ordered, Comrade Kutznikoff. The Committee will tell you what is happening, in their good time not yours.'

Kutznikoff turned and shrugged at his secretary he then stuck his head in the office where Fernee was sitting, 'I am sorry, comrade there has been a change of plan. Apparently all ships are going empty to Martovsk so we cannot employ you. Perhaps you could try another company?' This statement was accompanied by an enormous wink.

Fernee thanked Kutznikoff before he headed down to the dock to see what was happening. Fernee could not gain access to the docks himself but as he walked down its approach road he was pleased to see the place in uproar. A line of wagons, clearly loaded with cotton, was being ordered by officials, backed by soldiers, to return back from whence they had come. Then as the line of wagons began to turn in the road a column of wagons appeared at the dockyard gate clearly coming from the dockside; Fernee was pleased to see they were loaded with cotton. The line of wagons coming out of the dockyard drove straight into the line of wagons who were trying to turn round and in a few moments the whole street was full of shouting drivers, neighing horses and gesticulating furious Bolshevik policemen. Fernee noticed that the Bolshevik policemen were not averse to using their fists, boots or any weapon they had to hand to hit drivers or horses as a means to ending the chaos.

Fernee managed to find a restaurant that actually had food in it and as he was eating his meal he heard two Russians discussing what was happening in the town. Fernee could not believe his ears and warily he asked one of the men to forgive him for eavesdropping but could he repeat what he had unwittingly overheard. The man did not seem in the least put out.

‘Of course comrade, I have been told I have a loud voice. Apparently one of the Turkmen tribes, the Yomuts, who have never liked Russians, is getting ready to attack the town. The Soviet Committee has ordered all ships loading cotton to unload it. They are going to use the cotton bales as barricades on all the roads into the town.’

‘Why use cotton? I have cotton shirts and they wouldn’t stop anything.’

The two Russians laughed loudly. The one who did all the loud talking spoke after wiping his eyes. ‘Compacted cotton bales are so dense that they will stop bullets. I can tell you’ve never been in the army.’

‘Bad heart,’ replied Fernee. ‘Why are the Yomuts going to attack?’

The Russian now looked serious, ‘there are problems down the line somewhere beyond Merv. Counter revolutionaries, may they be damned to hell, have seized power. So a large party of the soldiers guarding this town have gone down there to shoot a few people and restore order. I should think these Yomuts know our troop numbers are reduced having been told that by some treacherous dog. They are taking their opportunity to raid the town.’

‘How do you know all this?’

‘Because my cousin’s wife’s sister is married to a member of the Soviet Committee and she told me.’

Fernee finished his meal quickly and returned to the house where he was to spend the night. The householder, Marunov the doctor, clearly had his finger on the pulse of local politics as he and Fernee discussed the situation. Their discussion concentrated first, on the fact that virtually all the Bolshevik troops had left Krasnovodsk to put down a revolt out beyond Merv. Second, that if the Yomuts were going to attack the town then despite the cotton barricades, with no armed men to oppose them, a Yomut success was almost guaranteed. If the latter were to happen then Marunov thought that the Yomuts would loot the city and kill as many Russians and other Christians till they were sated. Then the Yomuts, who were nomads and not interested in occupying the town, were sure to invite their co-religionists, the Turks, to cross the Caspian and occupy Krasnovodsk.

The discussion ended when Marunov said with a smile wider than the Caspian, ‘I have been joking about the possibility of a Yomuts attack on Krasnovodsk. Maybe fifty years ago it would have happened, but not now. The tribe has lost its fighting capabilities and weaves its rugs to earn more money than it ever did by attacking caravans or selling slaves. People have long memories about the bad old days and it is surprising what a well planted rumour can do to revive those memories.’ He giggled, ‘whoever thought that one up deserves a medal.’

The train to Ashkhabad was the following afternoon so in the morning Fernee went shopping to make sure that he and Baig had enough food to last them for four days. Fernee planned that four days of travel with the minimum of stops was all he would allow himself for the journey back to Meshed. To achieve his plan Fernee sent a telegram to Kaahka ordering horses and mules. The animals were to be ready to leave Kaahka for Meshed immediately he and Bedi arrived by train.

The train from Krasnovodsk took over twenty-four hours to reach Ashkhabad, nearly three times longer than their outward journey. On one occasion they were stopped in a passing area whilst a train full of troops lumbered by. Fernee increasingly began to fret about the impact this would have on his journey back to Meshed. When the train pulled into Ashkhabad station Fernee and Baig saw that the whole place was in turmoil. Armed men, not in uniform, thronged the station platforms shouting and screaming at the people waiting for the train. As soon as the train stopped the armed men began swarming through the train roughly handling anyway they did not like the look of. The searchers found two men wearing the leather jackets favoured by the Bolsheviks. The two were dragged off the train protesting until silenced by blows from the rifle butts of their protagonists. Shots were heard close to the train shortly afterwards. Fernee was tempted to stay and find out what was happening in the town but he felt it more prudent to find a corner in the station and keep his head down.

Only when the train eventually left Ashkhabad for Kaahka that Fernee found a Persian who told him the following. 'The whole force of Krasnovodsk Bolshevik soldiers arrived in Ashkhabad yesterday afternoon and evening. They were on their way east to put down a counter-revolutionary revolt near Merv. The local Ashkhabad Bolshevik soldiers were enticed to join them when they were told that not only would there be plunder but also a chance to create mayhem in Merv. All the Bolshevik soldiery then left on the train to Merv as soon as one was ready. By this act Ashkhabad itself was virtually denuded of Bolshevik troops and this prompted the local anti-Bolsheviks, led by militant railway workers, to seize first an arms depot and then the reins of government. Any Bolshevik who had been left in Ashkhabad was shot or hanged by the new anti-Bolshevik government, made up of God knows whom, this morning. They have got rid of the Bolos in Krasnovodsk too.'

Fernee got off the train in Kaahka and found that despite his telegram from Krasnovodsk ordering horses and mules to be waiting for him on his arrival, nothing had been done. It then took half a day for Fernee and Baig to round up a caravan before the pair set off travelling with only short halts taken during the darkest part of the night. This harsh travelling regime enabled them to take one day less than their outward journey from Meshed. It was after ten o'clock at night when Fernee's caravan rolled into Meshed.

Fernee was exhausted by his journey but excited by the information he had. He reported to the duty officer, a captain, who was new and unknown to Fernee. Fernee asked to see General Barber but was told that General Barber had retired for the evening and that he was not to be disturbed. Fernee's protests and insistence that he see the general immediately were pooh-poohed by the duty officer. To make Fernee's anger and frustration worse the duty officer ordered him to write a report of his mission immediately and then when it was written and the General had read it then Fernee would see Barber. The duty captain was amazed when, just after midnight, he had Fernee's report thrust into his hands.

General Barber put Fernee's report down on the desk and looked across at his head of intelligence.

‘Fernee came highly recommended from India and I think he did well, sir’ Colonel Statham said taking Barber’s look as his a cue to speak. ‘It supports what our Russian friend has been telling us.’

Barber rubbed his chin with his hand. ‘Yes, his mission has undoubtedly served its purpose. I think that now we have both have read this,’ he stubbed the Fernee’s report with his forefinger, ‘we can act—provided India agrees. Any reply from them yet by the way?’ He added more in hope than expectation.

‘No, sir,’ said Statham. ‘Are you going to tell Fernee about our friend?’

‘No, colonel I think I’ll let you do that when he arrives here in a minute. I will of course be here to clarify anything that he does not understand.’

‘Good idea, sir!’ I could clarify anything that he needs to know far more easily than you Brigadier, thought Statham.

The two officers then sat in silence thinking about what to say next to each other when they were saved by a knock on the door. The door opened to admit Fernee who as he sat down was pleased to see his report in splendid isolation on Barber’s desk.

‘Good effort, Captain Fernee. I found your report about your trip very interesting, though too brief. I sent it off to India, once I had turned it into something readable.’ As he said this Barber made the effort to look pleased but without displaying warmth.

‘Yes sir.’ Fernee speculated that the report Barber had sent to India was no doubt full of adjectives and adverbs, which added nothing to the meaning merely made it long winded and more difficult to read. Fernee initially wondered if his name had been removed from the report, then sense entered his head - of course it had. ‘Thank you, sir.’

Barber waved his hands. ‘I give praise when it is due. Now, Colonel Statham has something to say and I will clarify anything you don’t understand.’ He looked across the desk paternalistically. Fernee went to say yes but before he could do so Barber was continuing, ‘Good. Colonel Statham will now bring you up to date with events that have occurred here in the period that you have been away on your mission. Colonel Statham if you please.’

‘A General Blavatsky has arrived here as a representative of the Free Turkestan Union or FTU for short, Fernee. Now these FTU are anti-Bolshevik and I understand they are the people behind the coup d’état in Ashkhabad. One of the leaders of the FTU is this General Blavatsky who has come to ask for our help—a process that we have already started. Now, Fernee, first of all have you heard of General Blavatsky and second did you come across the FTU?’

‘The general no, but the FTU, yes.’

‘Should have been in your report about the FTU,’ interjected Barber. ‘Why wasn’t it?’

Who cares thought Statham. What we want to know is what Fernee can tell us now not why he didn’t tell us something in the report. Why do senior officers look to find fault?

‘As far as the coup went, general, there seemed five or six different anti-Bolshevik parties involved. I was told that the major protagonists and instigators of the coup were the Social Revolutionaries but other parties joined them. I understood that the FTU were just one of the names of the government.’

They were still deciding what to call themselves when I left therefore I did not mention that name in my report.'

'Don't make such omissions from any of your future reports without clearing it with Colonel Statham or me. That sort of thinking is best left to senior officers, Captain Fernee. You will add to the report the names of all the parties involved in this coup. Clear?'

'Sir,' Fernee made the effort to look contrite.

'Now we are waiting for India to decide about certain matters that we have put to them.'

Fernee did not move. 'Can I ask a couple of questions, general?'

Barber surprised said 'Yes, but be brief about them.'

'What happened to those Russian Jewish merchants and the warehouse?'

Barber looked across to Statham for help, which he got immediately.

'We have not heard anything since you were there a couple of weeks ago so we will keep monitoring the situation from Meshed.'

'Thank you colonel. General Barber said something about this FTU general.'

'Yes?' The general snapped—he never liked questions particularly those from a junior rank. 'I do have other important matters to attend to, Captain.'

'You said earlier that you were already providing support to General Blavatsky. May I ask exactly what that support is?'

Colonel Statham leaned forward expectantly. Barber was going to be very short with Captain Fernee but somewhere a voice deep inside said "Caution". Barber was about to say one thing and then as he opened his mouth he changed to the opposite. 'I think, as your involvement is likely to continue Fernee I can tell you. We have provided him with money to the tune of thirty thousand pounds in silver rupees and gold sovereigns.'

'You've given him British money?'

'Yes,' interrupted Statham as he saw the Barber's neck and face go puce. 'What do you think we gave him? French francs or, American dollars,' he joked trying to prevent Barber exploding.

'Well are we still trying to avoid any direct involvement in the internal affairs of Russia?' Fernee said this quickly looking at Barber.

'I think I can answer for the general.' Statham got a nod of approval from Barber who thought better that he makes a mistake than me.

'Yes we are not getting involved in what is happening over the border. Merely,' Statham struggled to find the right words, 'ensuring that those who oppose the Germans, like these FTU anti-Bolsheviks, get help - albeit only financial help.'

Tread very carefully thought Fernee to himself, so he switched on a smile. 'I think giving that money will be very appreciated in Ashkhabad. The thing is should you be providing British money to them rather than local or Persian money? If the Bolsheviks or German agents see our money they will cry 'wolf' and they will know for certain that the British are involved. Do we want that?'

Barber was now on the back foot. 'Possibly not at this time,' why hadn't Statham thought of that Barber pondered - the man was so lucky to be a colonel.

Ferneer clasped his hands as if in supplication and leant forward, 'can I suggest that we replace the British money with Russian or Persian money and then it is more difficult to tie the money back to us.' Fernee sat back in his chair waiting.

'I thought that is what we'd done. Why didn't you do that, Colonel Statham?' queried Barber.

You were the one who told me to act immediately and be quick about it my good general and you also said any currency would do remembered Statham. He could not say that in front of Fernee so he replied 'We had to act quickly, sir, and we just didn't have time to get other currencies.'

Act in haste and repent at leisure, Barber thought but decided against saying it in front of Fernee.

'Can I make a suggestion?' Fernee said in an effort to bail the colonel out. 'That we try and get the money back from the General Blavatsky and replace it with Persian and Russian notes.'

'That sounds like a good idea general,' said Statham.

Barber grunted to show that he was thinking and asked Statham. 'Is it possible to get that amount of local money? How soon could you get the money because I understand that the general is ready to leave?'

Statham snorted. 'The general is, how should I say?' He paused and his eyes betrayed amusement, 'of such a calm temperament that he is unlikely to leave within a week,' he paused again for effect, 'or two. He says the journey here tired him so much that he needs at least two weeks to recuperate.'

'Spends most of his time drinking I shouldn't wonder. Look I have an idea whilst you try and sort out the new currency why doesn't Captain Fernee go and persuade General Blavatsky to allow us to perform the change. Captain Fernee does speak Russian after all. No need to have what you and I need, Statham, a damn interpreter!'

'Good idea, sir' said Statham surprised that the general had a good idea.

'Can I make another suggestion, general?'

'Which is what this time, captain?'

'This coup d'état in Ashkhabad might have ramifications there for Baku. So I think I should return to the Caspian and find out exactly what is going in.'

'I will agree to that Fernee but I'll have to see what India says—Simla has a better overall picture than we have here.' He smiled, 'it is nice to see someone keen to do something. In the interim go and see General Blavatsky as soon as possible and report to Colonel Statham what he says to my suggestion about exchanging the money. You got anything to add,' he said looking at Statham who smilingly shook his head. 'Right then off you go, Fernee.'

Ferneer was utterly intrigued as he went to meet a soldier who was to lead the anti-Bolsheviks wondering what sort of man he would be. General Blavatsky was a man in his early sixties who had been retired from the Tsar's army before the war and had not been recalled to the colours during the conflict. The general was a cavalryman who moved at a pace that even a snail would call tardy. Fernee found the man pleasant enough but for a military man docile though Fernee did think that this might be because the general had a concentration span of only a few minutes. The general's grasp of facts made

even Barber seem a genius to Fernee. It was not difficult for Fernee to get the general agree to exchange the British money for a mixture of Persian and Russian money.

Statham obtained the equivalent Persian and Russian currency within three days of the return of the British money. Statham's speed of the money exchange was unmatched by any sign of the Russian general wanting to get back to Ashkhabad.

Chapter 30

Robbins was reading a newspaper when Edrich entered his office but he looked up immediately and thrust the newspaper onto his desk.

'Interesting information in this Tashkent newspaper that someone brought over yesterday. These Bolsheviks have nationalised cotton. The Turkestan Government is acquiring all stocks on behalf of the Central Government in Moscow.' Robbins picked up and waved the newspaper at Edrich with a look of utter disdain.

'Then the sooner we get permission to go to Tashkent the better, particularly if we can buy the cotton instead of the Hun,' responded Edrich.

'Yes and I have some news on that score from the governor here. Peking apparently has told him that we may be able to bring the cotton to Kashgar provided we pay all transport fees.'

'They could be pretty heavy, couldn't they?'

'No, not pretty—very heavy—so it might be easier to buy and then burn the stuff. The crucial thing being that it doesn't matter what happens to the cotton as long as the Germans don't get it. It states in here,' he waggled the newspaper, 'that the German army could be in Tashkent in two to three months.'

'It does?' said Edrich incredulously. 'They are not across the Caspian yet are they? I can't believe that they could get to Tashkent so fast for logistical reasons if for nothing else.'

'Neither do I, however, it seems that these Bolos are neither supporting, nor opposing the Germans.' Robbins tapped the newspaper hard with his forefinger, 'this is just German propoganda to keep the natives quiet.' He turned the paper noisily and pointed to another paragraph, 'they even claim that the Kaiser entered Paris in April when we know he didn't.' He threw the paper on the desk. 'The problem is we know most of the stuff they print is untrue but some no doubt is true. Our problem is identifying which is which.'

General Harris was standing by his window looking out at the parade activities before him. When Routledge entered he turned round with a smile as broad as the ocean.

'Come in, Routledge and sit down.' The general drew up his chair and beamed again at Routledge, 'the good news we have been waiting for has arrived. London and Peking's approval has been received by the Viceroy who

can now finally give final permission for our chaps to go to Tashkent. Not only that but it appears in a letter from Robbins to the Viceroy that the Russian ambassador in Kashgar has also approved the mission's bona fides. So it seems nothing can stop Robbins and either Washbrook or Edrich leaving immediately.'

'Great news sir, I'm sure our chaps up in Kashgar are raring to go. The orders are already written all we need is your signature. I have been carrying the orders around with me for days.' Routledge placed the orders on the general's desk and the latter quickly scanned them before signing. That done Routledge said, 'Edrich has been in Kashgar for over a week according to my calculations the others a few days. These orders will get there in the middle of next week. By then the Mission members will have had time to: rest from their journey from Srinagar; sort out supplies and clarified a plan of action for when they confront the Bolos in Tashkent.'

'Anything else we need to discuss?' The general asked pushing the signed papers across the desk.

'Yes, what is happening at the other end of Turkestan concerning the recent overthrow of the Bolos in Krasnovodsk and Ashkhabad. General Barber is recommending that Captain Fernee returns to Ashkhabad where apparently the new government is basing itself. Fernee's task is to identify the people with whom we are dealing. General Barber further suggests that Fernee then carry on to Baku and report the situation there to us. I think general we should say yes to both suggestions, otherwise we will remain in the dark.'

The general sat back in his chair and motioned for Routledge to sit. 'Agreed, I spoke to the Viceroy about these matters last evening. It seems to the politicians here in India that these Bolsheviks are actively supporting the Germans. The Viceroy told me that we need to get Barber to support whichever party is against these Bolsheviks, and that means we will support the current non-Bolshevik Ashkhabad government not just with money,' he paused for effect, 'but possibly with troops. The Viceroy was firm in his support of a mission to Ashkhabad and Baku. The major aim is to do as you said namely to clarify the position in both places prior to taking action. Therefore colonel when you have sent those orders to our chaps in Kashgar, I want you to draft orders for Barber. When you have written them, we'll discuss them, make any changes necessary and get them off today.'

'I will do that immediately, sir.' Routledge swept the Kashgar papers up and left the office.

Chapter 31

'How long you been back from Trans-Caspia—one week?' Barber barked at Fernee then without looking up from a paper he was writing, 'Sit down.'

'About,' Fernee's mouth opened.

Barber interrupted, 'that's not important. I want you to go back immediately first to Ashkhabad and then to Baku. The situation I believe, and India agrees,

has both worsened and got more confused since you were there. The Turkish threat to Bolshevik Baku appears to be increasing. Bolshevik revolutionaries still hold power in Tashkent. However it seems that our anti-Bolshevik friends govern the area from Merv in the east to Krasnovodsk in the west and control all the main railway stations between those towns.'

'Sounds like these Bolos may be in retreat, sir.'

'I hope so. Now go to Ashkhabad and find out the all you can about its government. See whether the funds we gave General Blavatsky will be used wisely. Any news on his return there?'

'He's still resting but he told me that he will return soon, probably leaving next week.' Fernee tried to sound positive.

'Let us hope. You send your report to me post haste from Ashkhabad. Then Captain Fernee, you will proceed to Baku and learn whether the Bolos and the Armenians are going to hold out against the Turks. General Muncerville meanwhile is continuing to try and get to Baku from Northwest Persia. The general is still being stymied by this Persian tribe the Jangalis and by the Baku government—see when he is going to sort everything out.'

'What exactly is General Muncerville to do when he gets to Baku, sir?'

'He hasn't got either a sufficient number of troops, or soldiers of the right type, to fight the Turks or the Germans. Therefore the general's job is to train and support the locals, including both Bolos and Armenians, to or in, their fight against the Turks and, or, the Germans.'

'We might train Bolos?'

'Well most of the Baku Bolos are Christian Armenians and their opponents are Muslims, surely I don't have to spell out what that means?' Barber looked at Fernee.

'No, sir,' Fernee said glancing at Statham who sat motionless - the poor man never got to say much. He was probably going to get the blame if Blavatsky did not leave Meshed soon.

'General Muncerville is the responsibility of General Dexter based in Baghdad; he is not my responsibility. I do not want to rely on General Dexter, the War Office or even the Foreign Office for information. You will report full, accurate and reliable information. What you find out and tell me will affect decisions that I have to make here. Do not let anything prevent you from doing what I have told you. Here are your orders carry them out faithfully and to the letter.'

Barber nodded at Statham who passed over an envelope. Fernee opened the envelope and took out a piece of paper. The orders were brief so clearly they were the work of Statham he mused as he read:

- 1: Determine whether the Ashkhabad government will be able to hold the railway line from their town to Merv, in Eastern Turkestan, against the attacks that can be expected from the Bolsheviks based in Tashkent.
- 2: Find out on what has happened to all the cotton stocks since your previous visit.
- 3: Persuade the authorities in Baku to accept the offer of British military help against the Turks. This help will be available in the shape of General

Muncerville and his British troops who currently are waiting just across the Russo-Persian border. It is to be hoped that General Muncerville will be in Baku before you. If he is not then action 4 below.

4: Obtain a large-scale map of Baku Harbour to

- a) Aid General Muncerville's Muncerforce arrival by ship from Persia;
- b) Plan the mining of the harbour if Muncerforce fails to get to Baku before the Turks.

Ferneer was pleased to see that his idea of mining Baku harbour had been accepted though no doubt if it had to happen and was successful in stopping the Turks crossing the Caspian he'd get no recognition. 'There is one thing sir, Captain Mawle. London had sent him to blow up an important bridge,' Ferneer wanted to add not code and decode verbose telegrams by a pompous windbag of a general. Mawle had made Ferneer promise he would request Mawle's presence on the new mission.

'You are not going to give me a diatribe about Mawle and his bridge, are you Ferneer? Because you reported that it did not exist. Colonel Statham checked it in our Military Files and he says that it doesn't exist. Whoever sent him on this wild goose chase to blow up a non-existent object should be shot. Ah, I see. You just want to take him with you for company, don't you?'

'Of course not, sir, but he could be useful if we have to mine the harbour.'

'Well he's a waste of time as a cryptographer so you can take him along as your no 2. As for mining the harbour how would he do that? You will not be able to take explosives with you.'

Ferneer sat in silence debating the point and was saved by Statham. 'There are numerous oil wells in the area so there will be explosives around those. We know an Armenian army is opposing the Turks so maybe they will have explosives they could give Mawle.'

Ferneer decided not to inform either of the senior officers facing him of Mawle's lack of explosives experience. 'Sounds like a good idea, colonel.'

'Man might be of use after all. That leaves us one other thing. Where is the confounded man? Find out where he is, Colonel Statham will you?'

Statham knew better than pull a face so he got up and traipsed wearily to the door stuck his head out and asked the sergeant sitting at a desk something that Ferneer could not hear. Statham then withdrew his head and closed the door turned and said. 'The sergeant has gone to fetch him, general.'

Barber exhaled loudly and said to Ferneer sharply, 'thinking time for you captain make sure you do some. Colonel, I think you know what is happening, so don't let me detain you because I know you are busy.'

Statham got up wondering why he had been needed at the meeting at all. He remembered he had written the orders and if Ferneer had had any questions Barber would not have been able to answer them—and he would look a fool. Statham had no problems in seeing Barber as a fool, it was just a pity that he wouldn't be there to witness it. Statham saluted Barber nodded at Ferneer and as he left the room he almost knocked down Wardle the British Consul in Meshed who simultaneously had arrived at the office door from the other side.

Wardle clearly had no intention of knocking on Barber's door he just blundered straight in.

'Better late than never, Mr Wardle, have a seat,' Barber jabbed his finger at the chair recently vacated by Statham. 'Captain Fernee has a lot to do before he leaves. Brief him on the politics succinctly if you will.'

Wardle sat still for a moment his face reddening and only Fernee's presence stopped him reprimanding Barber for his rudeness. Trying to keep an edge out of his voice he turned to Fernee, 'when you go back into Russia I would like you to see whether there are any commercial opportunities for us. I know that this is not your main reason for going but it would help us if you see anything.'

Fernee opened his arms, 'can you give me any examples of what you want, Mr Wardle?'

'Whether anyone: asks if the British Government will be providing credit facilities to purchase our goods; mentions investment opportunities in the local banks; identifies what goods they cannot currently get but would like to in the future in other words, captain, find out anything and everything that could improve trade for us. We will need to pay for this war and we will need to take every opportunity to trade and earn what we can.'

Fernee wondered what else he was going to have to do. Perhaps they could ask him next to count the number of horses he saw on the street of each town he visited. 'That shouldn't be a problem, Mr Wardle.'

'I'll reiterate in front of Mr Wardle that your primary roles are military intelligence and the status of cotton stocks.' Barber looked sternly first at Wardle then at Fernee, 'Captain Fernee you will however do your best to obtain what Mr Wardle wants. I need detain you no longer.'

As Fernee was leaving the room he heard Wardle say. 'Can I have a word general?'

'Terribly sorry I am busy please would you book an appointment with my sergeant.'

As Fernee opened the office door he heard a chair being aggressively moved. With a face as black as thunder Wardle pushed past Fernee without a glance. As he closed the office door Fernee peeked at the general who was busy writing at his desk oblivious to everything.

Mawle later told Fernee when he saw Barber the latter just said, "You are going with Captain Fernee on his mission - try and be useful." Barber barely looked up from his writing for the whole briefing except when uttering his final word—'dismiss.'

Sir Walter had begun to explain his consular work the day after Washbrook and Hutton's arrival in Kashgar. Sir Walter's descriptions took the form of lectures and were given each morning to Edrich, Washbrook and Hutton. The British consul went through his duties at a pace that reminded Edrich of his first Latin teacher in school—slow, sure and everything in triplicate. One of the most interesting things they did was to discuss how Indian subversives had tried over the war years to penetrate India via Kashgar, and how they had been thwarted. Other than that subject Edrich realised the consular duties described by Sir Walter in Kashgar were no different to those that he performed in Shushtar. One day, Sir Walter agreed because of Edrich's consular experience

and Washbrook and Hutton lack of it, only the latter two need attend his future lectures. Washbrook complained to Hutton that he had the experience of the role but did not share his complaint with Edrich. Not having to attend the lectures gave Edrich increased time to learn Russian though Robbins made it clear he preferred Edrich's time be spent painting.

Edrich was unsure whether the first two landscape paintings were completed to his satisfaction when Robbins saw them. Despite Edrich's protests that he needed to tinker with the paintings, Robbins professed he liked them as they were and had them packed immediately for their journey to England. Edrich, secretly pleased with the reaction, would have liked an offer of payment for the paintings, not for the money itself but because he felt if someone paid for something they would appreciate it more. When Robbins asked him to paint a portrait of Lady Robbins, based on a photograph—Edrich reluctantly agreed but prayed that the mission would get the go-ahead before he could get very far. Sadly the prayer was unanswered.

Chapter 32

Capturing the lines of Mrs Robbins dress Edrich was finding a problem because the photograph was not clear enough for him. The photograph he was using had been taken in the garden of the consulate not in the best light, as the sun seemed to have dazzled everything. Edrich knew that if you make a mistake in watercolour it is hard to correct and he began to wish that he was using oils—not that he had any of the latter with him—it was an easier medium for making corrections. He was standing studying his painting holding Lady Robbins' photograph in one hand and a paintbrush in the other and frowning heavily when Sir Walter burst into the room waving an envelope.

'Bill, we've got permission at last,' Robbins said excitedly. 'Sorry, Colonel Edrich, after all this is official business, the mission to Kashgar has received governmental approval,' Robbins smiling handed Edrich the envelope.

Edrich put down the paintbrush and photograph and read the contents of the envelope. Robbins meanwhile went and studied the portrait of his wife.

'You really are talented, Bill. I wish I could do something like this.'

'I'm not happy about her dress lines.' Edrich went and stood by Robbins. 'Now, I can see that those trees in the background are too dark and it is unbalancing the painting.'

'Look, I am happy and I am sure that Muriel will be equally delighted when she sees it. After all you are painting from a photograph and you haven't done that before have you?'

'No, I feel it is a bit like cheating. I should do it from life or should I say I prefer doing it that way.'

'That is a bit difficult with Muriel being back in England.' Robbins went and sat in a chair across the table from Edrich. Robbins turned the desk easel holding his wife's portrait towards him. He studied the painting for a moment

and smiled and nodded. 'Marvellous. I can't wait to get it framed.' He moved his gaze to Edrich who had sat down opposite. 'Right to work, I have my final orders from the Viceroy which basically ask me to concentrate on political and trade matters, whilst you?'

Edrich interrupting, 'military matters.'

Robbins waited as if expecting Edrich to expand on that word but when none was forthcoming he said, 'decision time, colonel.'

'Yes it is. I believe as the most experienced military man here that I should accompany you and leave Washbrook here as the temporary consul. The hard part will be when I give Major Washbrook the news that I am, and not him, going to Tashkent.' Edrich waved his orders at Robbins as though they contained something that supported his decision but they did not. 'Hutton seems to have improved, which is good news and I hope he will provide us with an extra pair of hands if nothing else.'

Robbins grunted and then sat back in the chair and looked to the portrait of his wife as if for inspiration. 'I have no doubt that you should come with me, colonel, not Major Washbrook. I believe the Russians will be impressed more by a colonel than a major but I must tell you that I find Washbrook, and this is strictly between us, has an unfortunate manner.'

'What way do you mean?'

'I find him surly and arrogant. When I was describing what the duties here were to him, he kept saying things like "I've done that on the frontier" or, "my experience was different and that worked". Chinese Sinkiang is not the North West Frontier we do things differently here. I know you have both done similar work but you have been a consul in Persia but he has not had that wider experience. I felt I had to stress to him that the Chinese are not Pathans and neither are the Russians. Still,' he added gloomily, 'I suppose he will learn by doing the job. At least he speaks Russian. Oops sorry, Bill.'

Edrich laughed, 'That is one of the reasons for my going with you and Hutton. You both cover my shortcomings. Bedi is still struggling to teach me Russian so I am glad that he will be coming with us. Bedi has also recommended that I take Ghulam Ahmad with me as another servant because he also speaks Russian and has lived in Tashkent until recently. I am not sure I like him though if you ask me why, I can't put my finger on it. Still, I trust Bedi and as he vouches for this chap I think I'll take him with me—provided I have your permission.'

Robbins looked serious, 'I think an extra person will be useful. I hardly know Ahmed because I took him on with Bedi's say so only a month or so ago. His Russian and Chinese are excellent. If we did not take him then there is nobody else.' Robbins paused and looked uncomfortably at Edrich, 'there is something else that worries me about Washbrook.'

'What exactly is that?' warily asked Edrich.

'My observation of him at the social events that we have been to is that he is too fond of the ladies by half. Europeans have a delicate role here. If he wishes to chase women then it must be in secret not in public. You cannot be fawning all over women, particularly if they are European women, in a public place. In some ways I wish Bill that you could stay here and let him come with me.'

Edrich felt his heart sink at the thought but smiled. 'Sorry, Walter, I can only be in one place at a time. Perhaps you had better have a word with Washbrook about his behaviour as you have observed this problem. It might be better coming from his predecessor who is an older and therefore wiser chap.' Edrich decided not to say anything about the Russian woman who had been stolen from under his nose by Washbrook at one of the dinners that they had attended in the Russian Consulate. Being a bad loser was not an epitaph that Edrich wanted. 'Does Bolotnikov still want to come with us?' he said changing the subject.

'Yes both he and his wife despite the risk. I told them that they should be ready to move within a day of our receiving permission to go to Tashkent. I suggest that we can go the day after tomorrow. Do you agree?' Robbins stood up.

'Yes, Walter.'

'I'll send someone to find Washbrook and ask him to come and see you. You can tell him what has been decided and then send him onto me, please.' Robbins turned at the door and rubbed his hands like a gleeful schoolboy, 'this is exciting, a secret mission and then returning home and retirement.' Robbins grinned like a Cheshire cat and just as he was about to disappear through the door he stopped and went and picked up the painting of his wife, 'this is good enough—an unfinished portrait.' Edrich said nothing but watched Robbins walk to the door where the man stood for a moment before turning round looking worried, 'One thing worries me slightly and that is our bona fides. They were issued here, so will they be accepted there? We'll only know when we get there I suppose won't we,' he said as he left the room without waiting for a reply.

Edrich had just completed reading through his orders again when Washbrook presented himself. Edrich waited till the man had sat down before he began.

'Major Washbrook, we have finally received orders from Simla. The mission will be going from here to Tashkent after all. I have discussed the matter with Sir Walter and he thinks, as I do, that I should be the military head of the group. Captain Hutton will accompany us and we intend to set out the day after tomorrow. You will act as the Indian Government's Political Agent here until I get back. I know that you will do a first class job particularly in sorting out these Russian refugees. I'm sure too that if we need anything whilst we are over the border that you will do everything you can to help us.'

'Yes, sir, but as I said in India I must protest at my change of role.'

'Your protest is noted. As I said in India, war changes things.'

'Yes, sir. Any idea how long you will be?'

'Unfortunately not but I cannot imagine that we will be there more than a month.'

'Hopefully you will be back before winter.'

'Yes, hopefully,' lied Edrich, 'who knows though. I may have to leave Russia through Persia and return here via India?'

'Let us hope not, sir. Then I can get back to my regiment as quickly as possible.'

‘Indeed. Anyway Sir Walter wishes to discuss some final things with you so perhaps you could pop along now and see him.’

Washbrook saluted and left the room. Edrich heard the sound of Washbrook’s rapping on Robbins’ door the door creak open and then the click as it shut. He sat back in his chair and mopped his brow.

‘Sit down, major, I’ll be with you in a moment.’ Robbins finished writing his letter put his pen down picked up an already addressed envelope and tucked the letter inside after pressing it against his blotting pad. ‘A note to Lady Robbins telling her I’m on my way home. Not of course that I said via Russia.’

‘Of course not, Sir Walter, the colonel said you wished to see me.’

Robbins looked blankly at him before he realised what he had to do and he blushed. Clearing his throat he began to fiddle with his pen and got ink on his hand, which he rubbed off on the blotter before dampening his handkerchief and removing the offending, spot. He cleared his throat opened his mouth shut it before he opened it again. ‘As the colonel has told you we are off to Tashkent finally. Do you have any problems?’

Washbrook’s eyes narrowed, ‘such as what problems?’

‘With the Russians you’ve been interviewing. I noticed you speaking to that pretty young widow the other evening, all evening. I hope she’s not one of these Bolos, major, they are by all accounts extremely wily.’

‘I don’t think so sir. The Bolos apparently shot her husband and hanged her brother. Bolotnikov knows the family. Very sad, so I felt she needed condolences.’

‘Indeed I am sure she did. You will be very careful, won’t you major, with how you deal with everyone here. The Chinese are extra sensitive. It is better by far to be doing something out of everyone’s sight.’

‘Such as?’

‘Well, talking to pretty young women. Hold your horses, major,’ Robbins thrust his hands at Washbrook who had leaned forward in his chair, ‘let me finish. All I am saying is that with the Chinese you must be aware of their extreme sensitivity. You are, apart from our Swedish Missionaries, virtually on your own here. Decorum, indeed excessive decorum, must be your watchword. You are upholding the Empire.’

‘Sir Walter, it is not really clear to me at what you are driving.’ Robbins stirred uncomfortably and looked embarrassed as Washbrook added, ‘I am aware of my position both personal and official. The Government of India quite clearly sees that I am capable of doing the job as does the colonel. If he did not then I would be going on the mission and he would be remaining here. I was selected because I am the right person for the job. I intend most definitely to continue your good work. I will run this post to the best of my ability until the colonel returns and I can go back to my regiment.’

‘Thank you major, I am sure you will do well. I just wanted you to be aware of the sensitivity of your role. I will see you this evening at dinner.’ Robbins heaved a sigh of relief as he watched Washbrook go through the door.

That evening when Edrich asked him how the meeting with Washbrook had gone. Robbins admitted that he had only hinted to Washbrook’ the worrying aspects of his behaviour. Robbins quickly changed the subject to discuss their

trip which when the full party set off for the Russian Border two days later consisted of: the British officials; their servants; a small body of Indian troops and the Russian consul, Bolotnikov and his wife.

Chapter 33

Washbrook guessed back in India that Edrich had no intention of becoming the consul in Kashgar and now they were in this bleak city he could see why. Initially annoyed at the change of his role he changed his attitude as he realized there were opportunities here to his benefit. Whenever Washbrook had the chance to visit the town on his own, he took it. On these visits he paid particular attention to the local Indian merchants and discussed with them: their trade; their families; their connections in Turkestan and India; most importantly, how they transferred money to India. On the day after Washbrook was told he was now the British Consul in Kashgar, he went into the town and visited a merchant he had identified earlier—Pandit Chandarasaker.

‘I know your cousin Mr Chandarasaker.’ Washbrook was squatting with the man at the back of the latter’s shop.

‘Yes, Major Washbrook. He told me that I might make your acquaintance and that we might discuss various matters of mutual interest.’

‘Indeed we may. Do you remit money back to India?’

‘Of course, most of my family is there.’

‘Do you remit it for yourself only or do you combine with other merchants?’

‘Myself only. Whenever possible I use gold rupees rather than Chinese silver tanga.’

‘I have become the consul here for an indefinite period. I will want to discuss with you matters of finance not today, but soon.’

Chandarasaker smiled broadly. ‘My cousin said that you were a man who had the best interests of merchants at heart.’

‘Quite so,’ Washbrook’s tone dropped an octave, ‘I assume you trade over the border into Tashkent. You have family there perhaps?’

Chandarasaker sat back and spoke slowly, ‘yes I do regularly. I have another brother and his family in Tashkent.’

Washbrook ducked out of the shop and slowly walked back to the consulate thinking about gold and silver coins—whoever said “Every cloud has a silver lining” should have said “Gold”. He began to look forward to the departure of the others to Tashkent.

Chapter 34

The same day that the Kashgar Mission set off for Tashkent so did Fernee’s Mission to Ashkhabad and Baku. The Tashkent Mission rode openly with the

British soldiers wearing their army uniforms. Fernee on his mission to Trans-Caspia went with Captain Mawle, a Persian and two Indian troopers—all five men were disguised as merchants or their servants. It was only eighteen days after his first journey on a train from Kaahka that Fernee was once again sitting on a packed train for Ashkhabad. The difference this time was that he did not converse in Persian, as he had done with Bedi, but in English. Mawle's claims that he spoke various languages turned out to be far from the truth as he knew only a few words of Urdu and Pashtu—he could not string a sentence together in either language. Inevitably the two men's use of English drew the attention of one of their fellow passengers who turned out to be a frontier guard. The guard introduced himself as Boris Seleznev, a Russian, and when he asked whether Fernee and Mawle were British, he was told the truth.

Seleznev and Fernee discussed whether the Turks would capture Baku and then cross the Caspian. The Russian eagerly probed Fernee with questions as to what were British intentions in Trans-Caspia and what size army they had at Meshed. Fernee decided to be as open as he could with the man though he was deliberately vague as to troop numbers in Meshed. Fernee wondered whether his openness had been wise when Seleznev got off the train at one of the train stops and disappeared into the station manager's office. Seleznev did not reappear from that office until a good half-hour later. As soon as Seleznev got back into his seat the train began again.

For a while nothing was said in the carriage then as the train seemed to be settling at a cruising speed Seleznev turned to Fernee and in a low voice said, 'Captain, I have taken the opportunity to send a telegram to Ashkhabad stating that I have met you. I said that I would ask you whether you would be prepared to meet with the Commander-in Chief of our army and the leaders of the new anti-Bolshevik FTU government.'

It could not fit better into my plan, thought Fernee, 'Yes, I am happy to meet them.'

It was gone midnight when the train pulled into Ashkhabad station. As soon as the train stopped Seleznev leapt off. A few minutes later he reappeared and asked Fernee and Mawle to follow him. The pair were led into a waiting room full of as disparate a bunch of men as Fernee had ever seen, and according to his sharp intake of breath neither had Mawle. Fernee then realised that he might be being harsh because the only light in the room was from a flickering candle and candle light never flattered anyone. One of the Russians, he assumed that they all were by their facial features, stepped forward and introduced himself as the Kuninoff, Commander of the FTU troops, he then introduced a balding man, Belov, as the FTU Government's President and leader of the recent coup d'état.

Fernee heart sank when he looked at Belov who was nervous as he introduced the rest of his group without pausing for breath and without Fernee being able to grasp what name applied to which person. His introductions done Belov sat down heavily on a bench whilst Fernee and Mawle did likewise opposite him; the rest of the men gathered around as best they could. The air stank of stale sweat that almost made Fernee retch whilst he could feel the fear of the men gathered round Belov.

'Who are you? What are you doing here?' Belov had a deep voice that faltered at the end of each phrase. 'By the way,' he said as if anticipating Fernee's question, 'the train will not leave without you.'

'Thank you. I am Captain Fernee this is Captain Mawle and we are both attached to the British Mission in Meshed, Persia.' A murmur ran through the room. 'We are on our way to find out if the Baku government will accept our help,' Fernee stopped when Belov held up his hand.

'What do the British want to achieve and what help do you British offer?'

'First, stop the Turkish invasion of Russian territory. Second, drive them back to their borders and make them sue for peace. I will say this - that like the Russians we have been fighting the Turks and Germans for nearly four years to stop them invading your and other countries. Britain and its Allies are fighting to prevent our joint enemies from stripping the natural resources from those countries that they have invaded whether it is wheat from the Ukraine or wood from the Northern Russian forests. Britain will continue to fight the Germans and Turks till their armies have had so many casualties that they cannot go on. Currently as we understand it, the Turks are pressing eastwards and clearly want to seize the Caspian oilfields and the cotton of Turkestan before they then invade India. You will be concerned over the first two events as we are about the third. Needless to say that if the Turks were to continue their invasion of Russia then they will bring terror and murder to innocent people, particularly Christians. Britain is anxious to stop the Turks in their tracks before that happens.' Fernee paused for effect 'Britain has no designs on any Russian territory whatsoever.'

Belov had had a whispered conversation with Kuninoff and one or two others in the entourage. Belov's voice did not tremble as he asked, 'do you think your commander would send us troops to help fight the Bolsheviks?'

Considering what he'd just said about the Turkish threat Belov's question surprised Fernee. He studied the Russian faces before him as he thought about his reply. Fernee wondered whether he should mention that he had met General Blavatsky in Meshed. Fernee decided that unless he was asked a direct question about the general it might be best at this time to say nothing in case the man had disappeared with the money. 'I am afraid I am too junior an officer to be able to discuss that matter with you. What I would suggest is that you send a telegram to General Barber in Meshed. I suggest that the telegram says that you have met me and that I recommended your government talk to him,' Fernee paused whilst he found a pencil and was pleased to find Mawle thrusting a blank piece of paper in his hand. 'I'll write his name first and my name second.'

Fernee handed the paper over to Belov who squinted at it before passing it over his shoulder to a colleague who gave it a peremptory glance before passing it on round the whole group until it ended back in Belov's hand, where it stayed.

'What I might add,' Fernee paused as he grappled to find the right title, 'President Belov.'

'Chairman,' Belov interrupted without rancour.

‘Perhaps you could arrange for me to be able to send a telegram in code to Meshed as soon as I arrive in Krasnovodsk? What I will do is report this evening’s conversation to the general and tell him that you will be contacting him directly.’

Belov looked round the room and then nodded at Fernee before he stood up and proffered his hand to Fernee. After both Fernee and Mawle had shaken everyone’s hand they were allowed back on the train which left the station immediately.

‘They didn’t look very statesmen like, Tom’ said Mawle once they were aboard the train.

‘No. I wonder how they will cope. I just hope the Bolsheviks are even worse. One thing though John now they know who we are there is no need for disguise.’ Fernee started to laugh, ‘not that the fact that you only speak English contributed much to our disguise.’

‘Well I admit a slight exaggeration on my part about my language and explosives capabilities—but I wanted to get out of London—do my duty.’

‘I can’t blame you for that,’ replied Fernee yawning. ‘It would have been nice if you had some abilities though.’

‘I admit that, but I can learn from you Tom. Did you notice nobody mentioned Blavatsky?’

‘I did notice. Blavatsky has our money, Captain Mawle; if you had to work with that lot would you come back?’

‘Yes, I’m honest.’

‘Really?’

‘Well about money. Shouldn’t we do something?’

‘I’m on a train in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of a war, with an officer who has no practical experience of anything I might need. What can I do about Blavatsky? Absolutely nothing and what is more at this moment I don’t care. Now learn from me, John, you shut your eyes and go to sleep.’

Chapter 35

It seemed no sooner was Fernee asleep than the train pulled into Krasnovodsk station where all passengers were thrown off. The men spent the rest of the night trying to sleep amid the stench of sweaty bodies in a packed waiting room. When dawn broke the men had a light breakfast of water and cold chapatti whilst Fernee took the opportunity to revise his plans.

Fernee ordered Mawle to go on his own to Baku to find McWilliam and receive his report. Mawle was also to reconnoitre the town and apprise himself of the current military situation. He was then to return to Krasnovodsk and report to Fernee. Fernee had decided that his meeting with the Government Committee in Ashkhabad was so momentous that he would telegraph Meshed immediately. Because a response from Meshed was so important Fernee thought he would better await their reply. Fernee said he would base himself at

Dr Marunov's house where he knew he would be welcome and safe. When Fernee finished telling Mawle his orders and what he himself was doing he could tell by his companion's face that something was wrong.

'I'm not going back to Meshed Tom. I refuse to serve under that horrible, rude, egotistical bounder, Barber. I have met some ill-mannered men in my time but he takes the biscuit.' Fernee marvelled at Mawle's restraint in his use of English. Mawle's face began to go red as he debated something inside. 'I'm going to tell you something I heard when I was in London and though I promised my source not to reveal it—I will.' He paused, 'Barber was bowler hatted from his East African command!'

Fernee knew that bowler hatted was a euphemistic term used for relieving a person of their command. The term was used not just to save the man involved but the embarrassment of the people who had appointed him. 'Who did that and why?'

'He was commanding troops at a battle, which was not going well. During the battle he claimed he was ill. He promptly handed over his command to his number two and drove off the battlefield in his car. Can you believe a British officer doing that?' Before Fernee could reply Mawle pressed on, 'General Smales had only just arrived to take over command of the whole East African Front. Well when Smales heard what had happened he was furious and accused Barber of cowardice. Though, whether Smales mentioned the word cowardice in his reasons for relieving Barber of his command, I don't know. I would think not otherwise there would have been a court martial and Barber would have been shot.'

'Pity he wasn't,' Fernee snapped.

'My source said that the sad thing is that the general perception, in the War Office, is that Barber is clever. In Africa, Barber wouldn't listen to his intelligence staff at all; many men went to their death because of that—only he knew best—attitude. Anyway, apparently when he was bowler hatted Barber tried to see Smales and Smales refused point blank to see him. Also like us, Barber's staff in Africa hated him to a man.'

'When did this all happen?'

'1916 in East Africa.'

Fernee thought for a moment 'What a minute something is puzzling me! If he was bowler hatted, how come he got the job in Meshed or before that in Mesopotamia?'

Mawle smiled sourly. 'He was a big supporter of Kitchener's when he was fighting Ballard over the Indian Army reforms ten years ago. Apparently Barber used to write pieces in an army newspaper obsequiously buttering Kitchener up. Result was Barber became a blue eyed boy to Kitchener (K) who put him in Intelligence where he did well. Barber then firmly grasped onto K's shirttails and rose with him before the war. Scum, as well as cream, rises to the top you know, Tom. He got his chance to command field troops thanks to K's myopic view that only his supporters were good soldiers. Kitchener promoted a whole raft of his acolytes to senior positions in both the Indian Army and when he returned to England in the Home Army. They look after one another. You know that. It never is what you know but whom you know.'

Mawle saw Fernee looking doubtful. 'I have it on good authority that Barber's immediate commander in Africa was Tighe. Tighe was scared of Barber. I heard that Barber used to write home to London and the War Office saying that Tighe's incompetence was the cause of his, Barber's, mistakes. Tighe knew Barber was writing back to London about him and that Barber was really good at playing political games with senior officers. Of course Tighe knew Barber was no good as a field officer but in the circumstances he could do nothing. Smales is not a wishy washy officer like Tighe and had no compunction about sacking Barber. None of our dear general's friends in London could save him. Of course Kitchener's ship had been sunk in 1915 and because he was dead he could not offer Barber help in 1916.'

'How come Barber got another job? Can you explain that?' Fernee wanted to believe Mawle but he wasn't convinced. He did remember complaints about Kitchener when he was C-in-C of the Indian army but Fernee always thought it was sour grapes over promotion.

'As I said Smales did not give all the reasons for bowler hatting him. With the shortage of staff and his background in intelligence perhaps it was thought he could serve some purpose.' Mawle then shrugged his shoulders, 'it is highly possible that army incompetence is involved!'

'How so?'

'Well one department in the War Office apparently didn't know that the man had been retired so they dug him out to serve in Mesopotamia and then Meshed. You know how the army has a habit of getting things completely and utterly wrong about someone.'

Fernee smiled wickedly. 'Like sending a man half way round the globe to blow up a bridge that does not exist. This same man has no explosives experience and cannot speak the languages of the lands he has to pass through secretly. Of course he said he could speak those self same languages.'

Mawle pondered a moment then grinned. 'Exactly, my case proves what I have just said. However, I did believe that a bridge existed and as for the explosives and language expertise.'

Fernee drawled, 'yes?'

Mawle's face went red, 'when I was in London I didn't actually say that I had explosives experience I just let them assume that because I was an engineer. As for the languages—well I just mumbled a few phrases in Urdu and Pashtu and the officer interviewing me had apparently never been out of England so naturally he assumed that what I said made sense. All I basically wanted was adventure. I did not want to be in an office in Whitehall doing whatever. I will not go back to Meshed.'

'John, I am still your commanding officer remember that. But perhaps it is just as well that I am sending you to Baku but I will want you back here,' Fernee tapped the arms of the chair he was sitting in. 'I will need your report—it is important. I understand your feelings and when you return we will see how we can use you here. This will be in the light of what Barber says—if anything—to the request the FTU government has made for help. Anyway you are going to get excitement in Baku I have no doubt on that matter. I just hope you will not

be around if the Turks arrive. You'd best be underway and I advise you to put your uniform on.'

Mawle set off to book his passage across the Caspian whilst Fernee went first to the Telegraph office to send his telegram to Meshed and then to Marunov's house where he was welcomed with open arms and a hot bath. Fernee could do nothing but wait at Marunov's house with increasing impatience for Mawle's return from Baku and a telegram from Barber; neither happened.

On the third evening after Mawle's departure, following an agitated walk through the town where he was pleased to see the bales of cotton remained stacked everywhere Fernee returned to Marunov's house to find the doctor had unexpected guests.

'Captain Fernee, how nice to see you,' said General Blavatsky warmly. 'May I introduce Mademoiselle Tamara Press, my secretary?'

Fernee bowed and took Press's hand gently in his and shook it she smiled in return an action that made his heart leap. Steady he thought to himself—I cannot afford to get smitten by a woman in my circumstances. 'So nice to meet you,' stammered Fernee with his heart beating fast.

'You too, Captain Fernee.' Press smiled sweetly for a moment and then set her face, 'we have some news that will shock you.'

'We have heard that the Tsar and his family are dead,' Blavatsky said simply.

Fernee looked and felt bewildered and his interest in the woman abated for a moment. 'How? Where?'

'A place called Ekaterinburg and they were shot by these Bolos,' Press spoke because Blavatsky was too overcome with emotion to reply. 'We hope for several things as a result of this.' Press looked at Blavatsky who motioned for her to continue, 'we expect that it will rally all good Russians to rise against these Bolos. We anticipate that the British will accept our invitation to send troops to help us not only to oppose the Turks, but to support us fully in our fight against these murderous Bolos.' Press looked forcefully at Fernee, 'we are confident that this will happen.'

Fernee could say nothing except, 'I am sure General Barber will do the right thing.' After his chat with Mawle the one thing Fernee could not be sure of was—Barber doing anything right.

The rest of the evening was spent in discussing the fighting that had occurred further east between the Bolsheviks and the supporters of the FTU government who called themselves Social Revolutionaries. When he heard the news that fighting was taking place outside Baku and the Bolos had lost control of that city to the FTU, Fernee decided to go there the following day and find Mawle. That night his sleep was interrupted by thoughts of: the regicide of the Tsar; the attractiveness of Press and the height of the waves on the Caspian Sea. Fernee need not have worried about the latter because on his crossing to Baku the sea was as smooth as a well shaved chin so much so that he was able to eat a full breakfast just before the ship docked in Baku harbour.

Chapter 36

On his arrival in Baku Fernee set off through streets thronged with people rushing hither and thither seemingly, to him, in a panic. He arrived at the Europe Hotel and went straight to the dining room where he saw Mawle and McWilliam eating a late breakfast at a speed that was in direct contrast to the streets he had just left. Mawle when he saw Fernee approaching groaned loudly.

‘So what is happening here?’ snapped Fernee looking angrily at Mawle.

McWilliam who was reading a newspaper looked up and put the newspaper deliberately on the table. ‘Good morning, Captain Fernee, have a seat.’ He pointed and Fernee sat. ‘Happening?’ muttered McWilliam, ‘the whole place is in turmoil because the Turks are really close by and the damn Bolsheviks won’t do a thing to help the town against them. The Bolos have also refused to allow General Muncerville to come from his base in Enzeli to help the Baku citizens. So the upshot is, yesterday our local government underwent a radical change. The Bolsheviks under Hagopian, their leader, have been replaced by the Social Revolutionaries (SRs). The SRs are the political group with whom you and Captain Mawle dealt on the other side of the Caspian—namely the FTU.’

Mawle began to gabble as though his life depended on it, ‘this is why, Captain, I haven’t come back to report yet. Things have been happening so quickly I thought it best to stay. When Hagopian failed to get any support from Moscow to fight the Turks, he and the rest of the Bolsheviks took umbrage and shipped out across the Caspian and headed for Astrakhan. But when they did that the swines took with them not just their soldiers but all the arms and ammunition they could carry.’

‘Christ, what nice people,’ Fernee said and slapped his thigh.

‘Exactly what I said, Tom, though I uttered a lot of Anglo-Saxon words normally found amongst our rankers. Armed ships loyal to the Social Revolutionary Government were dispatched to seize the Bolsheviks before they arrived in Astrakhan and bring them back with their weapons. It is like a game of musical chairs here.’ Mawle’s final remark was accompanied by a jovial grin.

‘What about General Muncerville what is he doing?’ Fernee looked from one to the other.

‘I am sailing for Enzeli,’ McWilliam looked at his watch, ‘within the hour. I have instructions from the new government here to invite General Muncerville to come to Baku with his soldiers and see what he can do. I recommend that Captain Mawle stay here.’

Fernee look surprised at McWilliam, ‘why?’

‘I think the presence of an experienced British Officer,’ Fernee glanced at Mawle, who studiously and with a reddening face looked away as McWilliam continued, ‘will help bolster up the town’s defences by giving advice to the local Armenian commanders.’

‘Not that they will pay any attention to me,’ said Mawle.

Thank god for that thought Fernee who switched his attention back to McWilliam, 'what, should I do, major?'

'Go back to Krasnovodsk and help organise their government to oppose the Turks from there. Even if Muncerville can get here I'm not sure he will be able to hold the Turks for long. If the Turks take Baku then we must stop them crossing the Caspian at all costs. The other thing you must do is get the FTU Government in Krasnovodsk to stop the Bolshevik army, currently in Merv, coming west.'

'I will try on both accounts. Perhaps by the time I get back they will have heard from Barber or the War Office about what we are going to do. I assume Captain Mawle told you of our meeting across the sea?'

'Yes he did. I cannot believe that Barber will send troops to fight the Bolos in Turkestan because it is still feasible the Bolos will change their minds return and fight the Turks her. The Bolos certainly won't return here if we're fighting their comrades in Turkestan. Actually I thought we were short of troops everywhere and had none to spare for a Russian venture. If the Bolos remain adamant that they won't fight the Turks we cannot afford for the oil to get into Turkish hands. If that happens then London or India must surely send soldiers from Mesopotamia to fight the Turks and wrestle Baku back into sympathetic hands—presumably the FTU.' McWilliam stopped to take a sip of coffee, an action that made him grimace because it had gone cold.

'What about the Germans - any news of them?' Fernee said thinking that if they were to arrive in the place that would be a very different arrival from that of the Turks—they wouldn't massacre the Armenians.

'On their way here though we have no idea exactly where they are, probably still at Georgia's capital, Tiflis. We are still hoping that if and when the Germans get closer to here there will be a falling out with their allies.' McWilliam sounded as unconvincing as he felt.

There was a silence between the three Britons as they each thought about what the arrival of the Germans in Baku might mean. Fernee wondered how control of shipping on the Caspian might be achieved in order to prevent either of Briton's enemies crossing that sea. The silence between the three men ended when Mawle spoke. 'Do you need me to do anything, captain?' His voice sounded so contrite that Fernee, despite himself, almost burst out laughing.

'The harbour map, did you do as I ask and get one?'

'Yes I did. It is in my room.' Mawle stood up and left the table. 'I'll get it now.' He scuttled off like a frightened rabbit.

McWilliam watched him go. 'Anxious to see action is our Captain Mawle. I suspect when he's seen some he won't want to do it again.' McWilliam wiped his mouth with a dirty napkin, 'I better warn you that other things have changed since you were last here. The government has just introduced a new law that anyone who leaves the town needs a visa. Getting a visa takes an age. It is so vital that you go back across to Krasnovodsk immediately that I recommend that you smuggle yourself aboard, somehow, without one.'

'Why? If they want British help won't they just give me one?'

McWilliam pointed a finger at Fernee. 'Well being dressed like you are as a Persian trader yet claiming to be a British officer would arouse suspicions. The

locals are shooting people on the spot whom they have the slightest doubt about. Trust me on that. Anyway, how come Mawle is in uniform and you are not?’

‘My uniform was not packed in my luggage, Mawle’s was.’

McWilliam smiled and added, ‘no disguise could hide the fact that Mawle is other than a British officer. Now there is one other thing that I want you to report on and it has nothing to do with military matters. Because of the cowardice the Bolsheviks have shown here, by abandoning Baku to the Turks, I think they are going to lose support everywhere in Russia just like they have done here. That said then one of Britain’s major future concerns is—who is going to get their hands on the Baku oil? I want you to report that I have met an American oil-man from Standard Oil, who are I believe are the largest oil company in the USA. He is quite clearly here for one purpose only—to get his hands on the oil.’

‘Surely if the Turks get here his life is in as much danger as much as ours would be?’

‘You are forgetting, Captain Fernee, that the USA is not at war with the Turks.’

At that moment Mawle returned with the map, which was huge being roughly five feet by four feet. ‘I’ll accompany you down to the quayside, captain.’ Mawle took out his watch and looked at it before snapping it shut, ‘the boat won’t be off for a couple of hours but it pays to be an early bird.’

‘Trying to get rid of me, John?’ Fernee said his face expressionless.

‘No of course not, Tom,’ Mawle was relieved to be back on friendly terms.

‘Now,’ said Fernee and tapped the map, ‘this. If I can get shot by just trying to get a visa what will happen if I am found with this.’

McWilliam stood up and shook Fernee’s hand before he left the table with the parting shot, ‘you’ll get executed. Still take care and good luck. Here you are take this with you, it is a nice bit of fiction. I’m off to Enzeli.’ McWilliam picked up his newspaper from the table and tossed it over to Fernee.

Mawle raised his eyebrows at Fernee as they both watched McWilliam disappear. ‘A very solitary and remote man is our Major McWilliam as his casual remark about you getting shot demonstrated.’

‘Perhaps. Now, how am I going to get on board ship and what am I going to do with the map?’

‘I have an idea about boarding but did you bring luggage with you?’

‘I left it with the porter here. Time being of the essence I thought I’d catch you both before I unpacked. Just as well then that I’m going straight back to Krasnovodsk.’

‘Can’t you put the map into your valise?’

‘Well I haven’t got any secret drawers if that what you are thinking. It is certain they’ll search that first. I suppose I might as well take this for some light reading.’ Fernee picked up the newspaper and put the map on top of it before he and Mawle stood up and got ready to leave the table. As Fernee bent down to pick the newspaper and map up with his hand the thought struck him. Fernee looked at Mawle and then back at the two objects in his hand, again he looked at Mawle. Slowly a smile spread across Mawle’s face as he realised what Fernee

had worked out and then nodded his appreciation whilst he watched Fernee fold the map and hide it in the newspaper.

‘I’ve a thought on how we might get you onto the boat. I’ll come down with you in case you don’t make it and they take you off and shoot you.’

‘In that case I order you to get back to Krasnovodsk somehow, anyhow and telegraph Meshed about the current situation.’

As the two men left the hotel what worried the two British officers was the number of soldiers in the town. If the soldiers were in Baku they could not be at the front opposing the Turks—had they abandoned their positions or were the Turks further away than was thought? When they walked through the main square of the town and saw a row of field guns lined up neither man said anything, but both pondered whether anyone was endeavouring to get them to the front.

As the pair drew near to the quay the press of people grew greater. The crowd seemed to consist of large groups of people. The noise emanating from each group seem to consist of women crying on the shoulders of men, children wailing as they clutched their mother’s skirts and the men making clucking noises whilst trying not to look apprehensive. Anyone who was trying to get on board the ship was being funnelled past a customs barrier. At the custom’s barrier hatchet faced police and other officials were thoroughly checking everyone’s baggage. Most of the people trying to get on board were women and children—virtually all of whose dress indicated that they were Armenian. The only men who seemed to get through were either old or were clearly not Armenians which made Fernee thank his god that he was still in disguise.

Fernee with the clever use of his elbows and with sheer determination pushed and eased his way through the crowd. Mawle was not so aggressive and soon the two men were separated by several yards. Finally Fernee arrived at Customs barrier where his case was searched thoroughly and a cursory search made of his person; all the while the latter was occurring he held the newspaper in his hand. As Fernee closed his case two policemen began to question him.

‘Where are you from?’ Asked one of the men amiably and in what seemed to Fernee a disinterested manner.

‘Persia. A town called Meshed.’

The man who’d asked him the question nodded and then said, ‘And what were you doing here?’

‘I am a trader. I was hoping to transact some business.’

‘You were?’ The second policeman, who had been watching Fernee, said with such intensity that the latter began to feel nervous. ‘What sort of business is that? You have nothing with you that indicates what you are doing here is what you claim.’

‘I and my family trade in wheat. Our supply used to come from the Ukraine to Baku then across the Caspian and from there rail to Kaakha and finally by camel to Meshed. Recently we have had to buy very expensive wheat through a British agency because of this war. I was sent here to find out if there was any chance of supplies re-commencing and seeing how we might pay for it.’ He

received a thrust in the back as people waiting to board pressed up against him and he stumbled forward.

'Stop pushing!' The first policeman shouted in a manner Fernee thought ineffective because after a pause of a few seconds the pressure on his back returned as before and he had to lean backwards to stop himself falling forwards.

'Why don't you have anything in your luggage that indicates that you are what you say you are?'

Fernee thought for a moment. The man was right he had nothing to show that he traded in wheat; then he thought I wonder if the man knows what I should have. Fernee opened his mouth to speak when suddenly he stumbled forward as the pressure behind him suddenly catapulted him forward. People behind him fell. A great outbreak of children and women's screams broke out as people tried to keep their feet under the forward press of the crowd. One woman in order to keep her balance as she stumbled forward seized hold of the aggressive policeman in a place where normally men like to be grabbed by a woman—if rather more gently. The aggressive policeman was howling and doubled over in pain as he tried to prise open the woman's hand. The placid policeman was desperately trying to retrieve his hat that had been knocked off, keep his feet and not to laugh at his colleague's predicament. Then anyone who had fallen or stumbled once they had regained their feet or were stable suddenly started pushing, fighting and screaming at each other, and anyone behind them who they thought was responsible. For an instance Fernee watched as the two policemen waded in to stop the melee and smiled as he saw the aggressive policeman still bent over in pain trip over someone's case and disappear entirely from view as a woman appeared to fall on him. Fernee raised his gaze and in the distance he saw Mawle disappearing as fast as the crush would allow. Fernee turned away from the fighting scrum and saw that every official who had been between him and the boat had moved forward and were laying into the crowd with fists, batons and anything else they had found to use as a weapon. Casually he walked away from the melee, came to a corner which he slipped round, then slowly strolled towards the ship's gangway swinging his case. Fernee was just about to ascend the gangway when he was thrust violently aside. Fernee struggled to keep his feet and cursed loudly in Persian at his assailant. When Fernee saw who it was he smiled because it was the woman who he had seen just hanging on to the aggressive policeman's nether regions at the Customs barrier. Fernee's smile faded when the woman turned round and snarled something in Armenian before she galloped like a wounded rhinoceros up onto the deck where by the time Fernee arrived she was nowhere to be seen.

A sentry on deck looked at Fernee suspiciously as he came aboard. 'What's happening down there? Why are you not in the army fighting against the Turks?'

'I'd just had my visa checked and started walking here when there was a lot of shouting—over what I don't know. I certainly did not bother looking. As for not being in the army I am a Persian,' stated Fernee, 'it is not my war!'

The man looked around as more women and children swarmed up the gangway and piled onto the deck in a mass of shrieking children and concerned mothers; the soldier then focussed his attention back onto Fernee. 'I'm not sure that's relevant. How old are you?'

Fernee thought for a moment as to why the soldier might be asking that question. Fernee's true age was 29 but he decided to make himself older. '38. I say again I am a Persian.'

'Your nationality is irrelevant! You don't look 38. I suggest you find somewhere quiet and lie low. The small forward saloon on the next deck down will do. When I come round I expect you to,' the soldier hesitated for a moment, 'enable me to go and have an eye test.'

Fernee puzzled about this for a moment before the penny dropped then he turned without another word and disappeared below. He walked forward until he came across what appeared to be the small saloon the soldier had mentioned. The saloon was for smoking but contained no-one. Fernee sat down and stowed his case under his seat and kept the newspaper firmly tucked under his arm. From time to time he stood and looked out of the porthole and watched people come aboard; very few young men boarded the ship and those that did inevitably went down again escorted by a soldier. At one stage an announcement was made in the corridor ordering all men ashore. Fernee deduced that the saloon was empty because from what he could hear all the passengers when they boarded crowded immediately to the ship's rail and shouted to people on the quay. Also Fernee realised the paucity of men aboard meant that there would be few smokers who would otherwise avail themselves of the saloon—he felt lucky.

When Fernee heard the engines begin to rev up he began to relax and imagined the soldier had forgotten him. Then he heard the clatter of boots and the saloon door opened to admit the soldier Fernee had met on deck. The soldier looked quickly over his shoulder and then at Fernee. Fernee stood and handed over a wad of Russian Imperial notes that he had been keeping in the lining of his coat. The soldier took them and looked at Fernee who shrugged to indicate that that was all he had. The soldier thrust the notes into his pocket and went back out through the door and as he did so Fernee heard him say.

'All clear here. That Persian looking man you're looking for is not in the saloon, neither is that woman you said grabbed you in the unmentionables.'

'Right then,' a voice replied, 'get ashore at the double.'

Footsteps clattered before fading away. A few minutes later Fernee felt the ship get underway. Half an hour later when Fernee could no longer see the port buildings he escaped the stifling saloon heat and joined his fellow passengers on the ship's upper deck where much to his delight there was a semblance of a sea breeze.

Chapter 37

As soon as Fernee arrived in Krasnovodsk the following morning he went straight to Marunov's house. Marunov was not surprised to see Fernee on his doorstep—bad news travels fast so it seemed. Krasnovodsk expected Baku to fall any moment and the FTU were beginning to panic at the thought that the Turks might cross the Caspian immediately. Marunov then said that a Colonel Barrington had arrived from Enzeli. Marunov said everyone he knew were not impressed that Barrington could speak neither Russian nor Armenian. Fernee deduced from the manner of the doctor's manner of speech that perhaps Barrington's lack of linguistic ability was not the real reason he was unimpressed by the British officer. Fernee immediately left for Barrington's hotel as soon as his meeting with Marunov ended.

'Captain Fernee I presume?' Barrington said looking up from a table where a few papers were scattered. 'I thought you were in Baku. Why are you back here?'

Fernee told him the news about the advance of the Turks, the fleeing of the Bolsheviks and finally McWilliam's trip to Enzeli to ask Muncerville to move British troops to Baku.

'I would have insisted that these Armenian blighters get our support ages ago, whether they wanted it or not.' Barrington face became contorted, 'Why are you dressed like that, Fernee? Where is your uniform? May I remind you that you are a British officer and that you have to impress these Russians with your appearance!'

'Sir, if I had worn uniform I might have been shot in some of the places I travelled through. I was working undercover and the general approved of that, sir. If it was not for my disguise I would not have got out of Baku. If I had not got out of Baku I would be unable to fulfil General Barber's orders to me which were to report the situation in the town to him. General Barber also told me speed is essential for my report. He said he expected the report to be the basis for the decisions he will be making.'

'Cloak and dagger stuff. All very well for penny dreadful and other books of that ilk but I have no time for them myself. I am a serious soldier who takes his role seriously. Clear, captain?'

'Sir!'

'When you are with me you will be properly dressed.'

'I didn't even bring a uniform, sir, if it had been discovered I might have been shot.' Fernee's face was beginning to burn as he fought to keep his temper under control.

'Stuff and nonsense, we must do something about it! I have a small staff but they will get you looking like a British officer.'

Fernee decided to change tack. 'Can I ask what your role is here? Does Meshed know you are here? If they don't then I shall have to let General Barber know about your presence when I submit my report to him.'

'I report to General Muncerville, you may inform General Barber of that as a matter of courtesy.' Barrington continued in a steady drone, 'My role is to ascertain on behalf of the British Mission at Enzeli exactly what is going in Krasnovodsk, and to meet with its government. I am not responsible to Brigadier General Barber, Meshed or India—I hope that is clear. Now in order

for me to do that I want you to act as my interpreter when the pair of us go down to the railway board office, currently used by the Free Turkestan Union Government as its offices.'

This nincompoop worked for Muncerville—we'll never win the war. The man seemed a typical red badge staff officer—living in a different world. 'Thank you, sir. I best draft my report now.' Fernee started to get up.

'Sit down! I have not finished!'

'When will that be sir?'

Barrington looked at Fernee with shock. 'I was talking, Fernee. Don't interrupt! I will finish when I get to the end and not before that. Now I gather that the FTU consists entirely of old railway men.'

'Not all of them,' Fernee's voice trailed away as he saw Barrington's face change colour.

'I can't imagine the railway men at Tunbridge Wells, where I live, running Britain. I dare say these are no different, probably a bunch of incompetents and illiterates.'

'No, I wouldn't expect this lot could run Britain, sir.'

Barrington looked stern. 'Don't make idle and facetious remarks, Captain Fernee. Go and find my staff and get them to kit you out. Then perhaps you can do some useful work in uniform not looking like a raggle-taggle gypsy wastrel. We'll go to see this FTU bunch as soon as you are properly attired. Be quick about it.'

Fernee left the room and went to find Barrington's staff which consisted of an officer and three other ranks. Fernee was able to borrow a cap that was too small, a khaki tunic that was too big and a pair of his own trousers that just happened to be brown. Fernee now looked like a man trying to provoke a smile from all and sundry. The shocked look on Barrington's face when he saw Fernee in uniform was worth to the latter a week's pay—the amazing thing was Barrington was too shocked to say anything.

The meeting that the two Britons held with the FTU puzzled the latter as they could not understand who Barrington was, or why as a British Officer he came from Enzeli and not from Meshed. Barrington who sat through the meeting with his legs carefully crossed smoking the whole time unless he was brushing imaginary dust or ash off his immaculate uniform. The members of the FTU clearly reciprocated Barrington's attitude to them and it was in an unfriendly atmosphere that the FTU and the British officers parted.

Fernee thought himself inordinately lucky that the following day he was not asked to perform any interpreting for Barrington. Instead Fernee visited oil storage facilities outside the town to determine the amount of stock they held because Barber would need to know what he could rely on especially if and when Baku fell. That evening Fernee and Doctor Marunov talked till the early hours of the morning about Bolsheviks, the Tsar and the most particularly the mental attitudes and aptitudes of officers, both British and Russian.

'I've had a coded telegram from General Barber instructing me to report back to him immediately,' lied Fernee having gained admittance to Barrington's office the morning after his discussions with Marunov.

Barrington grumbled, 'I need you here as an interpreter.'

'I'm so sorry but the general, if I may be so bold, is a bit of a martinet—he likes to be obeyed.'

'You shouldn't use that word about your commanding officer. I've got no option but to let you go.'

After a few hours sleep Fernee began the journey back to Meshed via Ashkhabad.

Chapter 38

When Fernee arrived in Ashkhabad he was surprised to be met at the station by Tamara Press. Press told Fernee that members of the FTU government had wired General Blavatsky to suggest that he discuss military matters as soon as Fernee returned to Ashkhabad. Once in the general's presence Fernee was all business as he gave the general a full report on what he had discovered in Baku—in particular the presence of troops and guns within the town. Blavatsky looked worried at the Baku news and his worried look deepened when Fernee questioned him about what had happened further east along the railway line. Blavatsky had bad news from that front because the Bolsheviks had forced FTU soldiers to retreat.

Having met Zukoff Fernee was unsure what the relationship was between him and Blavatsky, so he asked.

'General Zukoff is in command of all our forces. I command here,' replied Blavatsky.

It was ironic that when the discussion moved on to what Meshed was doing to support the FTU a messenger arrived for the general. The messenger delivered a note from a British Officer, Colonel Fishlock, who had just arrived from Meshed and was staying at the hotel. In answer to the question whether Fishlock was someone Fernee knew he answered the general in the negative. Blavatsky asked could Fishlock be genuine or a spy who should be shot. Fernee said he would go and find out.

After his recent experience with Barrington it was with apprehension that Fernee set off to meet Fishlock. He wondered if Fishlock was yet another useless paper-pushing staff officer and if he was, could Fernee tell Blavatsky that Fishlock was a spy and should be shot like all staff officers. He laughed over that thought as he arrived at the hotel. At the hotel Fernee met a sergeant he knew was based in Meshed who confirmed that Fishlock had arrived there after Fernee had left on his mission.

Fishlock saw Fernee immediately and listened intently to what Fernee had to say about Baku and what he had just learned from Blavatsky on events to the east. Fishlock thanked Fernee for his report and the clarity in which he expressed himself. Fernee felt pleased at receiving praise but when Fishlock said he wanted him as an interpreter Fernee felt uneasy. He asked the colonel whether he could speak any Russian.

‘If I could I would not need you to interpret.’ Suddenly an engaging grin spread on the colonel’s face, ‘oh you think I might be pretending not to speak it and then I could concentrate on studying our friends and keep some cards up my sleeve, or even checking on your linguistic abilities. Well I’ve no hidden cards and I am no Machiavellian so why do you have a reason for asking that question?’

Ferneer clearly hesitated as though he was unsure whether to speak but it was an act. ‘I interpreted for Colonel Barrington back in Krasnovodsk, sir. I do not think the FTU government officials were,’ Ferneer was going to say they were unimpressed with Barrington’s manner or, lack of the Russian language but was interrupted by a snort from Fishlock.

‘With Beaky Barrington—you were going to say they were unimpressed with him? I should hope not. I shouldn’t say this but being who you are and the role you are playing I will tell you, that man is a liability! He always has been a complete waste of time and always will be. Except for the war he’d have been retired. Not a word of this to anyone but he’s the sort of chap who could prolong the war. Wait a minute what is Beaky doing in Krasnovodsk? General Barber never told me he was one of his chaps and that he sent him there.’

‘Well he’s not from Meshed. Colonel Barrington is on General Muncerville’s staff and was sent from Enzeli to find out what was happening on this side of the Caspian and in particular what the FTU is doing, hence our chat to them the other night.’

‘I don’t suppose he said anything about what General Muncerville was up to?’

‘No, sir, I know the new government in Baku is finally going to ask General Muncerville for help against the Turks. Major McWilliam, our consul in Baku, was going to Enzeli to see the general the same day that I left to come back here. I just hope Muncerville is not too late and that the force he has is not too small to do the trick.’

‘Well only time will tell. I have been sent here by General Barber to formally discuss the request from the FTU for military assistance from the British. As yet the FTU has only asked Barber informally for such help. My job is to work out with the FTU a more detailed request of exactly what is wanted from us. I have already been in touch with the FTU who knew I was coming and I have a meeting in the morning at ten a.m. in the telegraph office. The other thing for you to know is that if either Turk or German crosses the Caspian the railway must be put out of commission. I know you have travelled the railway several times and I would expect you to be able to tell us where we could damage it.’

‘I can do that, colonel’

‘Good, please, be at the telegraph office in the morning, Captain Ferneer.’

Ferneer left the hotel with a feeling that the FTU committee would meet the Meshed man with rather more warmth than they had demonstrated with Barrington.

Ferneer was right. When the two sides met in the telegraph office business began to be transacted with a minimum of fuss. The FTU were worried by the defeat of their soldiers near Barium Ali by the Bolsheviks and that Merv would clearly be the next place in the Bolsheviks’ sights. The FTU formally asked that the British send troops to help them against the Bolsheviks. The FTU also

asked for guns and ammunition for their ill-equipped soldiers and as always money to pay the army. Fishlock promised that he would recommend that Barber would review all the FTU requirements and action would happen quickly. In an aside in English to Fernee Fishlock said that the only problem might be the money because Barber had told him that as far as he was concerned Russia was a 'bottomless pit' when it came to money and that he had no desire to fall therein.

Fishlock had been instructed to ask the FTU to allow all wireless stations within their territory to be brought under the control of the British. Further the FTU would be asked to agree to stop the infiltration into Persia of German and Turkish agents. Fernee then pointed out to Fishlock that he had seen German and Austrian agents in both Krasnovodsk and Ashkhabad attempting to buy cotton. Fishlock on hearing this asked the FTU to arrest all foreign agents in the two towns mentioned and to arrest any other Central Powers agents that were operating within FTU controlled territory. The FTU agreed to the British demands at which time Fishlock and Fernee held a tête-à-tête as to what was to happen next. Fishlock had to return post haste to Meshed to report on what had transpired at his meeting with the FTU; Fernee was now ordered to remain in Ashkhabad and liaise with the FTU and await events.

Chapter 39

To: General Harris, Headquarters Indian Army Simla
From: General Barber—Meshed

I have received a report from Colonel Fishlock in Ashkhabad and a communication from the current Trans Caspian Government, known as the Free Turkestan Union (FTU), requesting military help. The latter government consists of Turkmen and Russians.

Colonel Fishlock reports by telegraph that:

The Trans Caspian Government consists of nearly all ex railway workers with no experience of either war or civil administration; they call themselves Social Revolutionaries (SRs) and their government the FTU.

Bolshevik troops from Tashkent have driven the SRs back along the railway from Merv. The Bolshevik troops consist almost entirely of former German and Austro-Hungarian POWs. As such these Bolshevik troops are experienced soldiers. The soldiers have been promised that if they help the Bolsheviks drive west then when the Bolsheviks meet the Turkish and German forces driving to the east then the POWs can leave the Bolshevik army and go home.

The forces of the FTU are untrained and though their numbers exceed those of the Bolsheviks they consist only of a few ex Imperial Russian officers plus men from the local Turkmen tribes. The latter though warlike fifty years ago no longer seem to have any capacity for military action. The SRs are reported to have performed badly in the fighting for the town of

Merv. The Trans Caspian FTU forces therefore need training and they need weapons particularly artillery if they are to stop the Bolshevik drive west from Tashkent.

The Trans Caspian Government in Ashkhabad have made a formal request for money and arms as well as British troops to support the SR troops against the Bolos. I therefore seek orders as to what I should do in respect of this request. Colonel Fishlock in Ashkhabad is attempting to clarify what the FTU government need.

General Harris handed a sheaf of papers to Routledge. 'I thought you ought to read the instructions the Home Government had given us to forward to Meshed. The instructions have just been decoded so let us get them off, as soon as you have read them.'

To: General Barber—Meshed
From: General Harris—Simla

I have received the following instructions about your dealings with the Government of Trans-Caspia.

To: General Barber—Meshed
From: General McColl—War Office London

Because of the lack of clarity and accurate information concerning the area known as Trans-Caspia the War Office feels that they must trust the judgement of the person on the spot to do what they consider necessary. The key concerns of the War Office are: any crossing of the Caspian Sea by the enemy; their subsequent use of the railway line running east from Krasnovodsk to Merv. Every effort must be made to stop the enemy crossing the Caspian. If the enemy succeeds in crossing the Caspian then this railway line should be held by our forces against them. Any local force that might provide support for a German or Turkish advance to the east must be opposed. In this case the local decision must be to support the FTU by all means available.

Routledge handed the telegram back to General Harris. 'I think that in this case leaving the decision to the man on the spot is very sensible, sir. I just hope Barber does the right thing.'

'So do I Routledge, so do I,' the general stared at Routledge before adding, 'whatever that is.'

Barber waited until Statham had finished reading before he spoke. 'I think this gives me carte blanche to support our friends in Russia with troops. I will not allow it to be said that we failed to do our duty.'

'I absolutely agree, sir,' said Statham though he was far from sure that carte blanche was a term he would have used.

'I have drafted this telegram. Please read it, code it and write the necessary orders please. Immediate action is called for.' He handed Statham a sheet of paper.

To: President Belov of the Trans Caspian Government
From: General Barber

I have ordered Major Squires with a company of soldiers from the 19th Punjabis, plus a machine gun detachment, to report to the General Officer commanding your Trans Caspian forces currently opposed to the Bolshevik army of ex German and Austro-Hungarian soldiers based in Tashkent but now threatening Merv. The primary objective of the British soldiers is to support your troops and also to provide your troops with training.

Chapter 40

The meeting of the Eastern Committee was going well so far, thought George Merson. The week had been sunny and warm that always cheered the English, though if it lasted longer than the following week everyone would be complaining of drought. No doubt the improving news about the allies' situation on all fronts was also contributing to the good cheer everyone had. The German victory that had looked so likely during March, following their huge army advances in France and their successful submarine campaign, seemed to have diminished. The allied armies were regaining lost territory whilst the German submarine threat was being countered effectively by the convoy system.

With his passion for India undiminished Merson was still worried about Central Asia, the next subject on the agenda. As chairman he already knew what was going to be discussed and as far as he could see it was one piece of good news and another of bad. He was not sure whether the two pieces of news counterbalanced each other.

Arthur Ballard agreed with Merson that he would start with the bad news.

'We have some news about the situation in Georgia that has come to us from our ambassador in Oslo.'

Surridge interjected, 'excuse me, Foreign Secretary, why has this come from Oslo and as it is coming from there is it reliable?' Surridge sat back perplexed, Ballard's statement seemed to him rather like having something happen in India and the people who first knew about it were the Bolivians.

Ballard half smiled in a way that acknowledged the information's source was odd. 'Representatives of the Georgian government went to Berlin to make and indeed they have made an agreement with the German government. The Georgians have agreed to supply oil and cotton to the Germans. Apparently the Georgians and Germans have set up joint companies to handle this supply. The Georgians have also agreed to allow passage of German troops through the country. They have handed over their railways to the control of the Germans. Kress von Kressenstein, who landed in Georgia in May, commands the German troops there. On leaving Berlin following the signing of the agreements, the Georgians went to Oslo where they contacted the French and our embassies and informed both ambassadors of what they had done. The Georgians

indicated that signing this agreement did not mean they supported German war aims but that they felt they had to sign the agreement because they have no army to oppose the Germans. Any resistance and they could end up with their country ravaged by invading Turks who are already present in the south of the country. These Georgians admitted that they preferred the Christian Germans to be present in their country rather than the Moslem Turks. I don't think anyone can blame them for that,' Ballard looked over his glasses at the meeting's members and none of them contradicted his last sentence.

'Lesser of two evils,' Merson added, 'general, do we have any agents in place still?'

McColl was substituting for General Rixon who was at an Allied Military Meeting in Paris. 'No, the missions we had in Georgia and Armenia have both been obliged to retreat.'

'With the chaos that seems to be prevalent in South Russia how easy will it be for the Germans to move the oil or cotton and does it affect us directly?' SurrIDGE questioned.

Merson proposed, 'the Cabinet Secretary has those facts from the Board of Trade.'

Sir John Baxter looked at his paper, 'The Bolsheviks are shipping oil and cotton via Astrakhan for their own needs. The Germans could use that route.'

'Surely they'd use the Black Sea ports?' pondered SurrIDGE.

Sir John looked thoughtful before replying, 'the problem is though the Germans or the Turks might control those ports, traditionally the oil exports leave the Black Sea through the Dardanelles into the Mediterranean—which we control. Carrying both resources up the Danube is a strong possibility, provided they have the right ships or some other transport. It is not thought they do at the moment, though no doubt German expertise could cobble something together. I remind people an attack against shipping on the Danube was undertaken by the Royal Navy earlier in the war, but I do not think they could mount another because now our ships have no chance in getting into the Black Sea. Could the oil go through the Ukraine to Germany? I think the situation there is too fluid with the Bolos invading the Ukraine to try and win it back to Russia. So that route is vulnerable unless, as some of us think, the Bolos are German agents and if they re-conquer the Ukraine—they just wave the green flag at the Germans.'

'Though I am not an industrialist or economist,' interrupted Ballard, 'I would expect these commodities will only slowly arrive in Germany to replenish their stocks which we know are low. Therefore even if Germany gets supplies of both resources it will have an impact on their economy by the beginning of next year at the earliest.'

'By next year,' said McColl, 'American troops will be in Europe, trained and in such numbers that even these two commodities will not stop us winning the war.'

'We want it won before then. I don't like the thought of President Hickson controlling matters at the peace—too anti our Empire,' SurrIDGE stated what everyone else was thinking.

'No,' said Merson into the silence, 'any other comments?'

'Yes, there is something of military significance about this event.' McColl looked round the room. 'The German advance towards the Caspian now becomes easier because of this treaty they have with Georgia. They will be able to reach Baku very soon from the west using the railway to the Georgian border and that rail-line continues into Azerbaijan. However once the line moves out of Georgia will the natives or the Turks allow the Germans access to it? We all know that Turkish troops are slowly approaching the gates of Baku through Azerbaijan from the south-east. It appears to be a race between our two enemies as to who gets there first and then whoever it is, what is their intention when they get there—is it to cross the Caspian?'

Ballard rapped the table with his knuckles, 'good point. The Foreign Office is hoping the oil will bring the Turks and Germans into conflict over which country will or should control it—military alliance is one thing, trade competition another.'

The silence that descended after Ballard's comments was broken by Merson. 'I think you do have some good news as well, general?'

'The news we have is confusing so I will try and make sense out of it. The good news is that there has been change of government in Baku—the Bolsheviks have been overthrown. This new government has asked for British help against the Turks. General Muncerville whose progress to the Caspian was held up for weeks by the Jangalis tribe has finally defeated them and reached Enzeli on the Caspian. General Muncerville will now sail from Enzeli to arrive in Baku within the next three days. He can now fulfil what has always been his goal—stop Baku falling into enemy hands. The less good news is political rather than the military so perhaps it would be better for the Foreign Secretary to speak.' McColl looked at Arthur Ballard who took this as his cue.

'What happened was that the Bolsheviks actually left Baku by ship and abandoned the town to the Turks who were a few miles away. When the Bolshevik Government secretly left Baku most of the Bolshevik army joined them and took nearly all the town's military stores. However the Bolshevik ships were forced to return to Baku by other armed ships that were loyal to the new Baku government. The military stores were unloaded and made available to the city's defenders. When these Bolshevik troops declined to assist in the defence of Baku, apparently under orders from Moscow, they were allowed to leave for Astrakhan by sea. I understand a few of the Bolshevik troops did volunteer to remain behind to defend Baku but not many of them. All twenty six members of the former Baku government, the Bolshevik Commissioners, have not been allowed to leave the city and they have been put under arrest by the new government who consist mainly of Armenian Christians.'

Ballard paused and raised his eyebrows. 'Now here is a particular piece of disquieting news. There was also a German mission in Baku when the change of government occurred. Apparently this mission had received permission from the Moscow Bolsheviks to go to Baku to buy not only oil and cotton but also to buy manganese and to discuss the repatriation of German POWs. This mission, I am glad to say, has been interned by the new non-Bolshevik government. From the presence of this mission,' Ballard looked round the room, 'the Foreign

Office deduces that the Bolsheviks are aiding and abetting the German and Turkish thrust to the east.'

'So, Foreign Secretary, where do we go from here?' Surridge looked worried.

'I think we can do no more than wait until General Muncerville has had a chance to report on the situation in Baku. If the Armenians, with our support, can hold Baku and if things continue to improve in France, Mesopotamia and Palestine as they have recently, perhaps the Germans and Turks will be forced to stop where they are.'

Merson decided it was time to move on to discuss the next agenda item. 'Do we have any news from Kashgar, Lord Surridge?'

'As I said at the previous meeting, Mr Chairman, they should have left for Turkestan sometime last week. No doubt we will hear this week that they left last week. Next week no doubt I will have news of the specific date that they left last week. Unless they get to a telegraph station in Tashkent first in which case we might hear when they arrived before we have heard when they left.' Surridge sat back pleased with his rhetoric.

'Thank you, most informative,' Merson stared down at his agenda.

Grimes perched on the seat opposite Lord Surridge as the latter finished writing a document. That done Surridge handed the document over to Grimes, who took it but did not move out of his seat.

'You wish to say something, Grimes? Out with it I will not bite you as well you know,' he smiled when he uttered the last phrase. 'We seem to be doing rather well against the Hun at the moment.'

'Yes, that is it. I was talking to Sir Malcolm Brown of the Board of Trade last night at the club. We were discussing what was contributing more to our advance on the Western Front: our army's efforts on its own; the defeat of the German submarines in the Atlantic; the success of our blockade.'

'All three I should think,' replied Surridge.

'Indeed but we got talking about the blockade and Sir Malcolm mentioned that the Germans were very clever and that they were getting round the shortages by scientific means.'

'As you and I, Grimes, are both classicists we would not understand that.'

'That is what I said to him. Anyway he gave me an example of what the Germans had done.' Grimes looked anxiously at Surridge and took a deep breath, 'they no longer need to use cotton in their armaments they have invented a different way of generating nitro and gun cotton.'

'What invention?' Surridge's good humour was draining from his face very fast.

'They use wood pulp, wood cellulose he called it. The Germans only need cotton for clothing and they could use wool for that.'

'Where do they get this wood cellulose from?'

'Sweden.'

'Bloody Swedes, arch fence sitters, they are making a fortune out of this war. Why do the Germans want to buy the cotton if they have a replacement?'

'It is only a stop-gap because it is not as effective or as efficient as using cotton.'

'Could we block the transport of the wood across the Baltic?'

'We could send our fleet to attack German transport shipping but the entrance to the Baltic from the North Sea is narrow and the Germans could easily block it to our surface fleet. Our submarines would face the same problem as the surface fleet on entering the Baltic. Even if submarines could get into the Baltic it is a short voyage from Sweden to Germany so attack opportunities would be limited and I'm sure the Hun transports would have a lot of protection from the German fleet. Now Russia is out of the war the Baltic is virtually a German lake. Now with regards to the cotton we instructed our mission into Turkestan to buy all the cotton it could. Kashgar thought the amount we would have to pay for the cotton was four to six hundred thousand pounds plus transport costs say another hundred or two hundred thousand pounds. With things going so well for the Allies I wonder if the money would be better spent elsewhere. The Germans are not beaten yet, but if they need the cotton maybe we can let them buy it knowing it cannot save them.'

'Explain that last statement.'

'I've estimated it would take them several months to transport the cotton back to Germany even if conditions were right and I don't think they are right. First, the Germans could become enmeshed in the fighting currently between the Bolsheviks and the counter revolutionaries. Second, the railway they need to transport the cotton west is being used almost exclusively by the military on both sides of the Civil War, to move troops and ammunition. Alternatives to the railway like camel or horse caravans are slow and liable to ambush by tribesmen. Third, the only viable route to Germany at the moment is across the Caspian. Our allies the FTU have ships on the Caspian, which will allow us or them to seize the cotton as embargoed goods. We get the cotton free and Germany has wasted a lot of effort and money for nothing. So, I think we should let the Germans buy the cotton.'

The smile returned to Surridge's face. 'I like that. Wait have we heard from Tashkent?' Surridge's face changed back to a scowl when he saw Grimes shake his head. 'Then our mission may have bought the stuff already. Half a million pounds out of my budget would pay for a lot of soldiers and bribe a lot of people up on the Northwest Frontier. We certainly do not want to waste money where we do not need to. Why were we not informed about this German use of wood pulp instead of cotton?'

'I suppose they did not think it was relevant for us.'

'How do they know what is relevant? Did they tell the War Office about this?'

'I did not ask. I doubt it, otherwise the War Office would have told us and been less supportive of our missions.'

'You forget Grimes the War Office wanted to start a jihad first and foremost. The cotton was secondary to them. I suppose none of it matters now. Get on to Simla and see if they can do anything about getting information to Tashkent to suspend any cotton purchase. I am going to bring this matter to the attention of the Eastern Committee and see what that know-all Ballard has to say. We cannot run a war Grimes without information,' then angry he added, 'and accurate information at that.'

Surridge watched Grimes leave his office and then stood and began to stomp up and down the room muttering. A fly that had been annoying him all

afternoon buzzing round the office was scuttling across the window trying to find its way back to the outside world. Surridge returned to his desk and picking up some papers returned with a scowl to the window. Biding his time his lordship suddenly smashed the papers against the glass.

'Bloody hell,' he said as he threw the screwed up the report now splattered with the fly and its blood down on the desk, 'well it needed to be re-written anyway.'

Chapter 41

Seven days after they had left Kashgar and travelled through the mountains including a mountain pass of just over 8,000 feet Edrich and Hutton arrived at the Russian border. Hutton had once again become ill three days out from Kashgar with something that the medicine the party carried could not alleviate. In none of the Kirghiz settlements that the party passed was there a doctor who could help Hutton but one of the settlements made a litter slung between two ponies and thus Hutton could at least be transported. Edrich did think of sending Hutton back to Kashgar but the latter pleaded with him not to and that plus the difficulty of the terrain they had been through decided Edrich to continue the journey. Hutton's illness slowed the journey but this allowed Edrich to study the countryside and do sketches of it and the Kirghiz settlements that they passed along the way. What surprised Edrich as the party travelled was that the nomadic Kirghiz were beginning to enclose and irrigate fields.

After the party reached the border Hutton began to feel better much to his and Edrich's relief. Quite what had improved Hutton's health Edrich was not sure but he thought it might be the copious amounts of vodka that the pair had to drink with the customs' officials and border guards. The British party only stayed one evening with the convivial Russians for Edrich reckoned two nights there might result in alcoholic poisoning for him and might kill Hutton. None of the Russian border officials were Bolsheviks but they were expecting that at some stage Bolshevik troops to arrive and then fighting was expected between the two groups. The border guards had taken the trouble to build a protective wall round their post that Edrich was interested to see consisted of bales of cotton stacked one on top of the other. Needless to say the British party were allowed to continue into Russia by the border guards without difficulty but with a warning that any Bolsheviks that they met en route would be dangerous.

When Colonel Fishlock left Ashkhabad to return to report to Barber Fernee was left to deal with the FTU. Fernee's first job was a meeting with Belov, the local leader, in the telegraph building.

'Chairman Belov when Colonel Fishlock was here and you were discussing your requirements with him you agreed that the FTU would arrest all German and other agents who are here and in Krasnovodsk.'

'Yes, but we have to be careful,' began Belov.

'Yes we do Chairman. However, last night when dining in the town I saw the German party who are trying to buy cotton. Not only were they at liberty but one of them I am shocked to say was wearing what looked like a British uniform.'

Belov shifted uneasily in his chair. 'I know nothing of a man in a British uniform. However, I shall see that these men are arrested this evening. Are they to be shot?' the Russian spoke tentatively.

'Absolutely not, hold them and then perhaps we will move them to Meshed.' As soon as he said the second half of that sentence Fernee wondered if that was a wise thing to say. The Germans were FTU prisoners and there was not much of a gaol in Meshed. 'We'll get directions from Meshed as to what we do with them. Have you news of the fighting?'

'Yes,' Belov smiled, 'I have some good news for you, captain. British soldiers have arrived in Baku before the Turks.'

When Fernee left the meeting with Belov he decided that there was nothing more for him to do in Ashkhabad. He needed to travel to Baku and see what British troops had arrived and report his findings to Meshed—he knew Mawle would never think of that. Fernee also wondered if Muncerforce had people who could speak Russian. Fernee decided against telegraphing Meshed for permission to go to Baku, it would take too much time. The following day, after telling everyone what he was doing, Fernee was once again heading west across the Caspian.

Chapter 42

Edrich and Hutton had arrived in the railway terminus town of Andijan six days after leaving the Russian border. The journey from the Russian border was harder than the journey to the border from Kashgar because they had to cross a 13,000-foot pass where despite it being the hottest time of the year there was snow on the ground. Hutton's weak physical condition slowed the party so that it only arrived in Andijan one day before Sir Walter, who had set out from Kashgar three days after it. Edrich was glad to see Robbins and held a meeting with him in as soon the latter arrived.

'The mites are already beginning to bite,' said Robbins scratching at his leg. 'I can't wait to get away from the blighters they just seem to love me. Still the last couple of days haven't been bad—at least we are in Russia and so far safe and sound.'

Edrich nodded as he examined the walls and ceilings of the decrepit inn in which the mission party were staying. Edrich was looking for any hint of a microphone but he found nothing. 'Yes, Sir Walter, so far so good and lucky for us the border guards accepted our bona fides.'

'They were old Imperial Army soldiers and knew how to show respect to members of a friendly government. What I am wondering is if we will be allowed

to continue on to Tashkent or whether anyone here will actually order us back to Kashgar.'

'I have sent Hutton to buy railway tickets. I understand we will be unable to get tickets for all of us on the same train – because demand is high and supply is low. If he cannot get any tickets at all that will tell us unofficially that we cannot go on. I was thinking anyway that perhaps we ought not take too many people with us to Tashkent and leave some of our baggage here.'

'Why?'

'The situation is so,' Edrich paused as he struggled for the right word, 'unclear.'

'What does that mean?' Robbins stopped scratching his leg and looked at Edrich with raised eyebrows.

'Well we have not yet come across any of these Bolsheviks, who according to the border guards use German and Austrians as their soldiers. If we find that the Bolsheviks in Tashkent are not as black as they are painted we send for our people and baggage later.'

Robbins thought for a moment and then nodded in agreement. 'I was told the same thing. I agree caution is our best policy and there is no need to put people into danger unnecessarily. So whom should we take?'

'I think that everyone should take just one servant, mine will be Bedi. Havildar Iqbal will be responsible for our escort of course. However, I think we should take only four soldiers with us because I believe that the railway journey is less risky than the journey we have just taken.'

'Famous last words,' replied Robbins with a smile and was just about to say something when there was a knock at the door.

A sick looking Hutton appeared with news about the railway and the tickets. Hutton reported that there was an apparent scarcity of accommodation on the trains to Tashkent. Because of this scarcity Hutton said that it might take a week or more before the whole group could be transported to Tashkent. Hutton looked nervously at the other two as he told them that he had only been allowed three tickets for the following day, three for the train two days after that, then a final three tickets leaving in five days time. The rest of the party could buy tickets for their journey only when they became available in a few days.

Edrich told the captain that the ticket purchases tied in with the decision he and Robbins had made about not taking the whole party to Tashkent immediately. Hutton responded with a look of relief that he'd done something right by accident if nothing else. They then discussed the rail journey and it was decided that Edrich would leave first, Hutton next, then Robbins, leaving the Bolotnikovs to buy their tickets when possible. At the end of the discussion Edrich pointed out that this division of the party did have one advantage. The advantage was that if he found himself to be persona non grata to the Bolsheviks when he got to Tashkent then the others would be saved a journey, just then there was a knock at the door.

Edrich undid the flap on his revolver holster and motioned to Hutton to do likewise. Edrich shouted, 'come in.'

Bishen Shah entered the room and looked surprised at how Edrich and Hutton were crouching with their hands grasping their gun butts. 'There are three Indian merchants outside who wish to see the British Consul or Representative from Kashgar to discuss some serious matters.'

Robbins smiled and turned to Edrich. 'Well, colonel, I am no longer that person and as you are my successor I suggest that you deal with them. I will of course stay if you want me too.'

Edrich hesitated, 'I don't think that will be necessary, Sir Walter. You are now retired. Captain Hutton you may also be excused.' Edrich stood and turned to Shah, 'bring them into my room and I'll see what they want.'

Edrich went to his room and waited for a few moments before Bishen ushered the Indian merchants into the room. The merchants asked Edrich if it was true that he was a representative of the British Government. Edrich confirmed that he was the British Representative and that he was going to Tashkent to meet with the local Bolshevik Government. For the next hour Edrich discussed with the men the impact that the Bolshevik Government were having on them as traders.

It seemed that the merchants were terrified that the Bolsheviks were going to confiscate all their money or they would lose it because the exchange rate between the rouble and the Indian rupee had fallen astronomically. Edrich was then asked what he could do to help them. Edrich told the men that he would accept their roubles in exchange for some rupees now and give them a promissory note to pay them the balance of the money owed by him once they returned to India. All the merchants stated that it was their intention to return to India as soon as possible because of the current situation. Edrich said he was leaving by train tomorrow for Tashkent and that they should bring their roubles to the hotel in the morning before he left for the station at mid day.

Finally to Edrich's astonishment he was asked if the mission were the advance guard of a large British invasion force. When Edrich replied—no—he was told by the merchants that there rumours in the town that thousands of British and Indian soldiers were massed across the border in Chinese Turkestan ready to pounce. Edrich wondered how the men could ask such a nonsensical question knowing the difficulty of travel between India and this town. Despite what he thought about the question Edrich took the opportunity to explain that Britain had no intention of invading Russia. Finally Edrich agreed that one of the merchants, Pradip Shah, would find someone to look after the Mission's baggage when they went to Tashkent.

Edrich was dressing the following morning when he was told that Sir Walter wanted to see him as soon as possible.

'I am sorry but I have been sick all night so please excuse me receiving you in bed. The Bolotnikovs have gone back to Kashgar. They went at the crack of dawn this morning. Whilst you were dealing with those merchants last evening Bolotnikov came to see me. He and his wife have friends here as you would expect. Those friends recommended that the Bolotnikovs do not to go to Tashkent because if they did go on they'd almost be guaranteed,' Robbins drew his finger sharply across his throat. 'They set out back to the border at dawn our friend Ghulam Ahmed went with them.'

'If Ahmed has gone back that hopefully removes our thoughts on his being a Bolshevik agent. This is what we thought the Bolotnikovs reception here would be—still I suppose they had to try to come back.'

'God knows how they will live in Kashgar.'

'Still,' replied Edrich, 'they got further than poor old Shahzada Iskander Beg who never got out of Kashgar.'

'What did those merchants want last night by the way?' Robins asked shivering.

'To find out if we could protect them and their money. It seems that these Bolos might take all the merchants' money without so much as a "by your leave". Then the exchange rate is also not to these merchants liking. Nor would it be mine because it has gone to ten roubles for each rupee when it used to be one and a half roubles to one rupee. Anyway, I told them that I would take some of their roubles because I thought a few extra roubles might come in handy for us.' Edrich stopped abruptly and put his finger to his lips.

Robbins looked at Edrich quizzically who pointed his head towards the door Robbins began to talk nonsense. Edrich moved slowly and as quietly to the door as he could but just before he reached it one of the boards creaked loudly. Edrich moved quickly and flung open the door and as he exited through it he nearly knocked Ghulam Ahmad down.

'Were you listening at the door, Ghulam Ahmad?' Edrich asked angrily.

'No colonel.'

'Then what are you doing standing there?' Edrich said looking suspiciously at the man in front of him. 'I thought you had gone with the Bolotnikovs.'

Ahmed looked bewildered, 'gone where? I work for you not them.'

'True.' Edrich nearly said something about being worried about spies but stopped himself just in time.

'I was not standing, colonel I had just arrived there when you came through it. I came to tell you a man is here to see you most urgently.'

Edrich looked at Ghulam Ahmad without expression for several moments. 'Who is the man?'

'The Punjabi merchant, Bana, from last night.'

Edrich told Ahmad to bring Bana to his room. Edrich was surprised: that it was Bana and not Shah the man who was looking after their luggage; Bana was on his own both because the sums of money discussed the previous evening were large and lawlessness in the town was prevalent. It dawned on Edrich the merchant had not brought the money. The man re-iterated that he represented the other merchants but a matter that neither party had discussed the previous evening needed to be resolved. The matter was whether Edrich had any proof that he was who he said he was. Edrich told the merchant that he had no written proof that he was the British Consul in Kashgar but that Sir Walter Robbins could vouchsafe for him. On being informed of this lack of documentary evidence Bana said despite Sir Walter's presence in the party he and his fellow merchants would not exchange their roubles for a note signed by someone who might not be who he claimed to be. Edrich said he understood the man's caution and that he would probably do exactly the same thing if he himself were a merchant. This response from Edrich drew a smile of relief from

Bana who then left saying that he would return shortly to see if his fellow merchants changed their minds again and took up the promissory notes offered by Edrich. Edrich retorted that whilst he understood the merchants' predicament Bana must return within the half-hour because he, Edrich, had a train to catch. Bana did not reappear so the last thing Edrich did before he left for the railway station was to destroy the promissory notes.

Robbins and Edrich agreed not to present their credentials to the Tashkent Soviet immediately. Sir Walter arrived in the town but to wait for a day or so. This delay the two men felt would give the Bolotnikovs more time to return to the border and cross safely back into China provided the Imperial border guards had not been replaced by Bolos. If there were any problems on the railway that interfered with Robbins' arrival in Tashkent then Edrich would present his credentials alone.

Edrich on his arrival in Tashkent moved into rooms at one of the town's best hotels, The Grand, which he felt was ideal for his headquarters. When Hutton arrived two days later sporting a bad back that he claimed was due to the train's appalling seating Edrich could only agree. As they waited for Robbins, Edrich and Hutton were surprisingly unbothered by anyone from the Bolshevik Foreign Ministry so the pair explored the town trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. It was clear however that the Bolsheviks knew that the mission was in the city because whenever anyone left the hotel they were followed overtly sometimes by as many as three people.

The main observation everyone made was that the Central Powers POWs were to be seen roaming the city everywhere without hindrance. The POWs could be seen either begging or working. If the POWs were working they were doing everything from playing in bands, painting houses and selling tickets at the cinema. Bolshevik soldiers were also seen and these were dressed in a variety of uniforms, German, Austrian, and Russian as well as a hybrid of all three.

Edrich and Hutton received a variety of visitors at the hotel, Indians, Sarts and Russians. Most of the visits were to do with money—to exchange roubles for rupees or gold, to borrow money, to obtain help in smuggling money to Kashgar. Edrich and Hutton firmly rejected all of the visitors on the basis that some of them would be agent provocateurs and neither officer was yet able to tell who was which. Robbins' arrival in Tashkent was delayed owing to problems on the railway so Edrich decided to present the mission's credentials at the Foreign Ministry without him. Comrade Plasov, the minister, said he would see Mission members in two days time. Edrich was pleased by this delay because he needed Robbins' expertise and there was a good chance that the man would have arrived by then. By the morning of the meeting Robbins had still not arrived leaving Edrich nervous about what he should say. Edrich said that Bedi was to act as the interpreter at the meeting. Hutton's knowledge of Russian would be kept secret for the moment.

Chapter 43

Two days after leaving Ashkhabad Fernee once again found himself in the Hotel Europe. The hotel was now the British headquarters for an advance party of the Muncerforce. Fernee quickly found and reported to Colonel Keyworth who commanded the advance force in Muncerville's absence. Colonel Oakes who was with Keyworth was Muncerforce's intelligence officer. Fernee quickly explained what was happening on the eastern side of the Caspian and then asked how it was the Turks had not seized the town already as they had been at Baku's gates when he had last been in the town.

Oakes told Fernee that the Turks had just strolled towards Baku expecting to walk into the town without opposition. So confident had the Turks been of themselves and so keen to avoid damaging the town, because they preferred to plunder an undamaged place, they had not bothered to shell the city. As it happened the Bolsheviks had lined up their guns in the town-square prior to their leaving for Astrakhan. The Bolshevik commander, Martov, on no more than whim decided that the gambolling casual Turks presented too good a target so he opened fire and caused so many casualties that the Turks had retreated to and subsequently stayed in their lines for the past six days. In the meantime General Muncerville had accepted the invitation to provide support to the Baku government against the Turks and the two colonels and a few NCOs were the advance troops of that British support.

'What happened to the Bolsheviks?' Fernee said.

'Hagopian, the Bolshevik leader, and Comrade Martov, the army commander, after decimating the Turks seized some ships and took all the guns and ammunition that they could carry set off by sea for Astrakhan, basically abandoning Baku to the mercies of the Turks - just like they did before. The Caspian fleet is not Bolshevik so they chased after the Bolos and brought them back.'

'Now they are back will they fight?' Fernee spluttered.

'Not yet, but we are discussing it with them and the Armenians. In fact all we have done is jaw-jaw since we got here, isn't colonel?' said Oakes glancing at Keyworth.

'It is, colonel. Captain Fernee,' Keyworth paused for a moment as he chose his words, 'what is your role and why are you here?'

'I am a Russian speaker who has been working in disguise finding out for Meshed exactly what was happening on both sides of the Caspian and whether the locals wanted support military or otherwise.'

'Otherwise means money,' interjected Oakes.

'Yes, anyway there was nothing to be done at the moment on the other side so I thought I should pop over and see if I could help.'

Oakes and Keyworth exchanged glances then the latter spoke. 'I think your services as an interpreter will be most welcome starting,' Keyworth looked at his watch, 'in an hour.'

'What about Meshed?' Oakes asked.

‘I have a free hand or I should say a fairly free hand from the general. Being here I am sure, will please him because I can keep him up to date by reporting from here.’ He wondered if that was true.

Again the two officers exchanged glances with both looking pleased at Fernee’s statement.

‘Now there is one serious matter,’ Keyworth looked stern, ‘Captain Mawle is he one of yours?’

‘Not strictly speaking. He’s a War Office chap sent via India to blow up some bridges over on the eastern side of the Caspian, but it turns out the bridges do not exist. He came with me the last time I was here. I told him to be useful militarily. If the Turks got here before you he was to blow up the harbour or if not perhaps some wells.’

‘Did he have any explosives?’ enquired Oakes.

‘Well we came in disguise and we couldn’t smuggle any across the border.’

‘Answer my question, did he have any explosives?’ repeated Oakes.

‘No, he was going to try and find some here.’

‘From where precisely? Then, what was he going to do, take on the Turks single-handed?’

Fernee felt himself getting uneasy. ‘I think he thought the oil wells were bound to have some explosives lying around.’

Oakes and Keyworth shook their heads in wonderment. It was Keyworth who spoke. ‘One man was going to blow up the harbour and five hundred oil wells?’

‘Well not all five hundred because that would be impossible.’

‘Captain Fernee, blowing something up without any explosives, I agree, is impossible. Blowing something up if you have no explosives knowledge and no discernible military ability is also impossible. I really do not know what London was playing at sending him out here.’

‘I would think they did on the off chance he would blow himself up. It would be one unemployable dunderhead less,’ laughed Oakes sardonically.

‘Captain Mawle, what did he do?’ Fernee nearly felt afraid to ask.

‘The day we arrived in Baku a ship from Astrakhan also arrived and anchored off shore. This Astrakhan ship had German staff officers aboard and they sent a boat ashore to ask where the Turkish Headquarters were. Our dear Captain Mawle on hearing this hired a boat. In this boat he went out to the ship, took out his revolver, marched on deck and arrested every Gerry he could see.’

What is wrong with that thought Fernee then he saw the look on Keyworth’s face and he knew he was going to find out.

‘Just as he was rounding them up when what should arrive alongside the ship but a boat full of Baku soldiers, intent on arresting the Germans. To say the Baku soldiery were not pleased by Mawle’s action would be an understatement. Those soldiers felt that arresting the Germans was an internal Russian matter and had nothing to do with the British - I agree. Mawle arguing with the Russians when neither spoke the other’s language was also not appreciated by the latter. The man is an embarrassment so I want him gone.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Today, on the next boat out of Baku, I don’t care where,’ Keyworth barked.

'I'll send him to Krasnovodsk there is bound to be something to do there.'

'I can't think what, as he has no language or military knowledge to speak of.'

'Ashkhabad would be better don't you think?' Oakes suggested.

Keyworth pursed his lips and then rubbed them with his fingers. 'Further away you mean?' Oakes nodded. 'Yes.'

Ferneer waited expecting to hear the dread word 'Meshed' but it was not mentioned. A few minutes later Ferneer was sitting in Mawle's hotel room telling him the bad news.

'Show a bit of gumption and you get bowler hatted. How was I to know the Russians were going to act and act fast? What do you want me to do?'

'Go to Krasnovodsk and chat to a snotty, elderly colonel called 'Beaky' Barrington. See if he has anything for you. He's one of Muncerville's officers and I am not quite sure what he is doing in Krasnovodsk because that is in Meshed's area of responsibility. If he can't offer any work then I want you to go to Ashkhabad and wait. A Colonel Fishlock who arrived in Meshed after us was sent by Barber to Ashkhabad to find out what help the FTU want from the British. I went with Fishlock to the meeting with the FTU and they want troops. Fishlock returned to Meshed with those requirements the same day that I came here. I am expecting or at least I am guessing that Fishlock will return with some sort of instructions from Barber. Ask Fishlock if he has got anything for you.' Ferneer hesitated deliberately, 'if he has not got a job for you or he has not arrived back in Ashkhabad within five days you will have to go back to Meshed.'

'Christ, Tom, not back to Barber.'

'Those are my orders. I just hope that Fishlock arrives back in Ashkhabad at the head of some troops. Actually I think that will happen and if it does Fishlock seems like the type of man who will give you the opportunity for the action you crave.'

'Ferneer is in Krasnovodsk on his way again to Baku, sir.'

'Why is he going there? I thought his last wire said the place was just about to fall.'

'Apparently it has not fallen and he reports that General Muncerville is on his way there.'

'Anyway we don't need Ferneer there we need him here! Get him back now! I don't want my officers gallivanting round the place just because they feel like it, I tell them where to go. What about that scallywag Mawle?'

'In Baku he's not blown anything up yet, though I'm not sure he's even capable of doing that.'

'Unless it's himself and that would shorten the war.' Barber picked up a report and stared at it for a moment as if thinking, which he was not. 'If they want Mawle they can keep him. Get the telegram off about Ferneer as soon as possible. Just because we are at war doesn't mean that a junior officer can potter willy-nilly about Asia—I am angry Statham. Tell Ferneer he's to get back here without his feet even touching the ground. Do I make myself clear? He is in your Intelligence Department, Statham, this reflects poorly on you.'

'But he is reporting directly to you, sir.'

'If I wanted to split hairs about to whom he reports I would - but I don't. I cannot do everything, colonel. When Fernee gets back here I suggest a severe talking to him by you will be in order. Dismiss!'

Chapter 44

Plasov, the Foreign Office Commissar, growled a greeting at the two British officers and their interpreter Bedi as they entered the room. Plasov then deliberately switched his attention back to reading the paper he held in his fist. Edrich looked at Hutton who returned the look with an exaggerated raised eyebrow. With a grunt Plasov signed the paper and put it to one side. Plasov stared from Edrich to Hutton and back again with a scowl contorting his face. Slowly and deliberately Plasov picked up what looked like a telegram from his desk. Plasov trembled with anger as he dangled the document in his fingers and barked.

'I have a report here,' he waved the paper, 'that says an army of British troops from Meshed in Persia has invaded Russian territory. This British army met our soldiers east of Ashkhabad. Our brave comrades inflicted severe casualties upon this invading army of British soldiers and their counter revolutionary allies who were then forced to retreat back into Ashkhabad,' Plasov looked up and waved the paper aggressively at the two British officers before he shouted. 'No doubt part of a British scheme to expand their Empire,' he looked down at the paper without changing tone or waiting to catch his breath, 'which is failing and will continue to fail.' He threw the telegram down on his desk. 'You come here to my office, sit in my chairs and at the same time your army is invading my country. Why should I not have you shot?' He took his watch out of his pocket and added casually, 'in five minutes time.'

Edrich sat through the tirade from the Russian with a gradual sinking feeling in his stomach. Perhaps it would be better to be in Kashgar. Honesty he decided was the best policy in this situation. 'I know nothing of these events, Minister. I have no knowledge of any of our troops from Persia invading your country.' He turned, 'do you, Captain Hutton?'

'No, Colonel Edrich, I certainly do not. I cannot believe it.' The negative reply from the latter was as long drawn out and as emphatic as Hutton could manage.

Plasov smiled but not humorously and shook his head. 'Of course the captain has to agree with his colonel because he is his superior. Oh well two British officers say they do not believe what I say. Two people who have been here in Tashkent for a few days incommunicado with the outside world. And I,' he waved his hands in the air, 'a poor simple Russian has to believe them rather than a report from our own troops received yesterday by telegram. I must believe you two because you are British?'

Edrich and Hutton had both flushed at these remarks. Edrich fought hard to control himself and he could feel Hutton beside him shift in his seat. Edrich

sensed that Hutton was going to say something, so to forestall him he said quickly, 'how do you know they were British troops, Commissar Plasov? I served in Persia until recently and we had enough troops to police the south of the country but never enough to invade anyone. May I also remind you that we are still fighting the Germans in Europe and our armies there have the highest priority for men—we have none to spare for an invasion of Russia.'

'How is it known the soldiers fighting us were English? Easy, the shell casings we found after your army was driven from the field by our men had English words on them.'

'Are you sure, sir?' said Hutton eagerly trying to support Edrich and remembering to relay his question through Bedi. 'They might have been German shells. Your chaps may not know the difference between English and German because they both use Roman script. They could have been confused.' Edrich cleared his throat for Hutton to shut up before he said anything else. Hutton took the hint.

Plasov was enjoying himself. He sat in a relaxed fashion with his hands clasped gently resting on his desk. 'No confusion captain, we know the difference between the two languages. Do not insult us. Take my word, they were English shells.'

'That does not mean that the soldiers who fired the shells were English.' Edrich kept himself as relaxed as possible.

'It doesn't?' Plasov looked genuinely mystified by this statement. The man leaned forward and put his head in his hand whilst he rested his elbow on the desk and stared at Edrich, 'how so?'

Edrich was not sure whether the man was mocking him. Edrich played what he hoped was his trump card. 'I know that British guns, shells, rifles, bombs indeed a whole range of ordinance were sent from England over a long period to help Russia in her fight against the German,' he paused, 'invader. They could have been fired by,' Edrich nearly said the Germans but thought better of it, 'the soldiers you are calling counter revolutionaries.' A thought suddenly struck him, 'the shells that were found could have come from America.'

Plasov rubbed his mouth with his hand. 'Time will tell, colonel about the shells. Once we know we will let you know one way or, 'he paused and then sneered, 'the other.'

Edrich knew that he had given the other food for thought but was not enamoured of the man's last words.

Hutton decided to add his thoughts. 'Commissar Plasov it could be that the soldiers who fought against you might be mercenaries. These mercenaries could have been in the British army at one stage, but they may have joined your enemies for more money than we can afford.'

'Oh yes a very possible and likely scenario captain,' Plasov laughed and shook his head before staring at Edrich. 'Now, colonel what are you doing here in Tashkent? Are you part of this invasion of Russian territory by British forces? Are you the advance guard for a force of British or Indian troops that are now massing on the border?'

Edrich thought, you cannot have ever been to the border Commissar Plasov if you think we could have much of a force there. Then, chum there are the

Chinese who dislike foreigners more than anyone else, so there is no way that the Chinese would allow British troops in Sinkiang. 'No, we have no troops in China, or in Afghanistan waiting to come here, Minister Plasov.'

'You will refer to me as Commissar, Comrade Plasov or Comrade Minister,' thundered Plasov. 'So if you are not the spearhead of an invasion then I ask you again - why are you here?'

'Comrade Plasov the intention of His Britannic Majesty's Government, of whom I am the representative, is to find out what the Bolshevik Government of Tashkent intend to do with the German POWs and the local cotton crop.'

It was Plasov's turn to go scarlet and his voice quivered with anger. 'The term Bolshevik may not be applied to me because I am, and proud to be, a Revolutionary Socialist. The term for our government is the Tashkent Soviet, which is a revolutionary council under the direction of the Soviet Revolutionary Council based in Moscow which consists of several allied parties. Please remember to use the correct term when addressing me and my government.'

'I am sorry, Commissar, I was unaware of the difference. Please excuse my ignorance.' Edrich hoped that his contrition would placate the Russian—but it failed.

'What business is it of England's what we do with German POWs? That is between the Soviet Government in Moscow and the Germans in Berlin. It is an affront to ask me,' Plasov snarled.

Edrich thought hard before replying. 'Minister, the only reason my government asks about this matter is that it is worried that the German POWs on their way home through Turkestan might cause trouble if there are unsupervised. Any trouble that the Germans might cause may result in the Asian Moslem tribes tarring all Europeans with the same brush. The tribal trouble might then spill over from Turkestan to Afghanistan, Persia, China, India and indeed everywhere causing major death and destruction.' Edrich felt his last statement weak but to openly state that the Germans might be part of an invasion army might make the man opposite apoplectic.

'The Swedes have provided Captain Anders to the Red Cross and he looks after the welfare of the German prisoners and Major Bohr from Denmark the Austro-Hungarian Imperialists. Both will continue to do their duty until the prisoners are returned home.' Plasov said clearly indicating by his manner that the discussion about the POWs was at an end.

'Well as to the cotton, Comrade Minister, my government will be willing to buy what you have and they hope that you will promise not to sell it to the Germans.'

'As we are no longer fighting the Germans we see the current war as now being between the Imperialists. The cotton will be sold to whosoever can pay for it and remove it.'

Plasov sat quietly waiting for a response from Edrich but the latter decided to say nothing. It seemed an eternity before Plasov spoke again. 'I will be communicating with Moscow about you and your party, Colonel Edrich. I do not want any of you to leave Tashkent without my authority. If you try to leave you will be shot. Do you understand this?'

'I understand what you have just said, Comrade Minister. However I must protest your threats. You have seen our bona fides and you know that we are official British Government representatives.'

'Colonel, a representative of the previous government wrote your so-called bona fides. A government that was filled with criminals. Such a document is therefore worthless, some would say less than worthless because it allies the British with the former criminal regime. This latter fact alone can have you shot. You have no papers from your own government, do you?'

Edrich squirmed in his seat. He realised now that the Indian Government should have provided the mission with official papers addressed to the revolutionary government not the old imperial government. The trouble was he realised was that he was accustomed to making unofficial intelligence trips on behalf of the Indian Government. He had made several such trips in the ten years prior to the outbreak of war and the Indian Government had always turned a blind eye to accepting responsibility for such missions. Edrich had always accepted India's feigned ignorance of what he did although both knew he was on secret intelligence missions. One role he performed on such trips was mapping unknown or unexplored parts of a country that could be used by India for military purposes. Edrich's drawings, paintings and collections of local fauna and flora though they ostensibly contained nothing of military interest served another purpose. Edrich had a knack of drawing things of a military interest e.g. a fort, but hiding it amongst surrounding trees or hills. Camouflaging something in such a way Edrich hoped made it easy for a conscripted soldier on patrol somewhere who looked at his work and saw the trees, or the mountains, but not the veiled military object behind them.

Local government officials he had dealt on his trips were non-European and as he had lived for over twenty years in the east he felt he understood how to deal with them. One thing for sure no local official that he had ever met had threatened him with death because his papers were not in order. This mission Edrich now realised was very different other than he had as usual had no official standing. He was dealing with Europeans whose country was in chaos thanks to the beginnings of a civil war and as a result the Russians were likely to be utterly ruthless with those they thought of their enemies. Edrich cleared his throat but his voice cracked as he said. 'No, Minister.'

'Mr Compton, the United States agent, had the right papers so I will not be shooting him.' Plasov was clearly enjoying himself. 'You are official representatives of the British Government if our Soviet Council in Moscow tells me that you are.' He added peremptorily, 'you may go.'

Edrich and Hutton stood as Plasov switched his attention back to a pile of papers on his desk from which he selected the top one.

'Comrade Minister,' said Edrich. 'Sir Walter Robbins our former consul in Kashgar is part of our mission to you. Sir Walter has been delayed but he is expected to arrive, any day. May I present him to you? I suggest this because he has visited Tashkent several times and is known here. If you allow us both to return then he can allay some of the disquiet you are undoubtedly feeling.'

'I do not know him but I am a reasonable man. Is he like you two a military officer?'

'No.'

'Then I will meet him. Good bye.'

Chapter 45

At the end of their meeting with Plasov Hutton and Edrich returned directly to their hotel. The two officers were delighted to find that Sir Walter had just arrived although he was not in the best of tempers because his rail journey had taken nearly a day and a half and he had been unable to sleep during it. Despite the Sir Walter's tiredness, Edrich proposed that the three men hold a meeting to discuss what had happened at the Foreign Ministry and to decide on their immediate tactics. Sir Walter asked if the meeting could be delayed whilst he had a bath and a change of clothes.

The meeting was further delayed by the lack of hot water available in the hotel. The hotel manager claimed it was too expensive to have hot water available during the day and it was unreasonable and unusual for people to expect that. For the first time Edrich heard Sir Walter lose his temper the result of which was a supply of hot water in remarkably quick time. When Robbins came to the meeting he looked clean, refreshed and in a more than equable frame of mind.

Edrich had selected his own room for the meeting knowing that the only adjoining room was Hutton's and the one immediately above was Sir Walter's. He had searched his room three times very methodically and could find no indication that eavesdropping could be undertaken. Bedi was posted outside the room's door to keep an eye out for spies.

Edrich opened the meeting with a précis of what had been discussed with Plasov. Robbins looked concerned when told about Plasov's unwillingness to accept the mission as official but perhaps he thought that his very presence would clear that up at the next meeting with the Commissar. Then Edrich described what had happened since his and Hutton's arrival. The pair had had visits from undoubtedly agent provocateurs and Edrich had noticed, though Hutton had not, that his room had been searched.

'Did you complain about that?' When Edrich shook his head Robbins said, 'on the train here today I met someone I knew and he told me that virtually all the former government officials have been replaced by revolutionaries. I heard that this chap Plasov used to be some sort of engineer. So whilst your reluctance not to complain is understandable these scallywags need to be told about diplomacy.'

'His hands were those of a common workman,' interrupted Hutton

'I'm a politician not a soldier, so he may treat me with more respect than he would soldiers and if he does not, I shall react accordingly. What the hell is that?'

Barely distinguishable shouting could be heard followed by the thunder of boots on the stairs; a thunder, which grew in intensity before the door burst

open to admit a burly man in a threadbare Russian uniform followed by six soldiers in a mishmash of uniforms. Bedi whose arm was held in a vice like grip by a soldier had blood pouring from his nose. The burly man obviously the leader screamed at his men and two of the soldiers began to open Edrich's bags and rummage through them. Robbins argued forcefully with the leader but the only response he got was more shouts and a wave of a piece of paper. Robbins attempted to read the paper but the leader pushed him away and shouted at the four remaining soldiers who left the room pushing Hutton and Robbins before them. As the door opened to allow the men to exit Edrich caught a glimpse of a cowering hotel manager standing in the hall outside with a soldier holding him by the neck. The leader smiled as he stared at Edrich who was watching the other two men as they went roughly through his things.

'Why is your nose bleeding, Bedi,' Edrich asked the Indian though he had a good idea how and why it was.

'I was sitting in at the top of the stairs when these soldiers came in with the hotel manager who pointed me out to this brute of an officer. The officer just came over hit me, grabbed my arm and came straight here to your room. I am sorry, colonel, I was hoping to warn you. It is not too bad,' he added nasally dabbing at his nose.

'He obviously knew where our rooms were so in the circumstances you could do nothing to warn us.' Edrich looked at the officer. 'Faced with this brute I could have done no better. Bedi, hold your nose with your hand like this,' Edrich grasped the front of his nose hard with his forefinger and thumb, 'and then blow that will stop the blood.' This nose bleed trick Edrich had learned whilst playing rugby where his nose at some stage of every game seemed inevitably to get bloody. Bedi did as he was told and the blood ceased.

Edrich looked at the burly man and snapped, 'tell him I want his name and the name of his commanding officer.'

When Bedi translated Edrich's request the burly man just said something and then he and the two soldiers began to laugh.

'Ivan the Terrible,' translated Bedi.

Edrich gave the Russian a look of disdain then he and Bedi watched the two soldiers who on finishing rifling through all his cases, without finding the false bottoms, began searching everything else in the room. At one stage one of the soldiers took Edrich's service revolver out of its holster and showed it to Ivan exchanging a few words with him as he did so. Ivan looked at the revolver carefully then handed it back to the soldier to replace, saying something to him at the same time; the soldier looked at Edrich and grinned. When the search had been completed and Edrich's things had been thoroughly strewn across the room, Ivan and his two soldiers left. Edrich heard a few shouts and after a short delay, Edrich opened the door to see all the soldiers congregate round the leader and after a brief conversation with him they loudly vacated the hallway. The leader shouted something at Edrich before he disappeared.

'See you again, imperialist,' translated Bedi.

Edrich then visited Robbins' and Hutton's rooms, which were in the same mess as his. Both men reported that nothing had been stolen and that the search had been perfunctory rather than thorough; Edrich's opinion also. When

Edrich asked about the leader and the piece of paper the latter had waved Robbins said that it was a search warrant issued by the police.

Edrich returned to his room and watched Bedi standing in front of the mirror attempting to look up his bloodied nose.

‘What did those two ruffians say about my revolver, Bedi?’

‘The soldier asked if he could keep the gun and Ivan said not now but in a few days they would return here and then he could have it.’

Once the rooms had been tidied the meeting between the three men resumed. Edrich began, ‘this searching of our rooms may be a trick to get us to act in haste and do something stupid. I suggest we plan what we need to do, decide who does what and at all times remain on our guard.’

‘If I may suggest that the first thing we do is to revisit this man Plasov. We can then present my credentials, which unfortunately do not differ from yours, I just hope that my face is recognized and that will smooth the waters. We must, however, protest this searching of our rooms and from what you say also protest the fact that we are being followed by the police wherever we go.’

‘I agree, Sir Walter, I’ll draft a note requesting an immediate meeting and send that to Comrade Plasov. If you and I can see him tomorrow then what I’d like you to do Hutton is to begin to find out about the German and Austrian Prisoners of War numbers.’

‘Any suggestions on how I do that, colonel?’ Hutton then added with a nervous grin, ‘do you want me to go round the streets and count them?’

Edrich laughed as he said, ‘I don’t think so.’ He thought for a moment it was like dealing with a child. ‘Find that Red Cross Swedish officer.’

‘Captain Anders,’ Hutton said quickly.

‘Yes, go and see him. Find out who the name and rank of the officer is in charge of the German Prisoners. Though we are concentrating on the Germans, find out: the total of all Central Powers POWs; the total for each different nationality; how many POWs have joined the Bolos in total and by nationality; and finally why are POWs joining the Bolshevik army. As soon as we know those figures we must get them off to Simla. I am worried that we may be expelled soon, so that is your task.’ Edrich turned to Robbins. ‘Neither Hutton nor I believe there are as many POWs here as we expected to see around the town I’d like to know why.’

‘What language should I use with Anders?’ Hutton interrupted

Robbins looked nonplussed at Hutton but Edrich responded, ‘try English first, otherwise use Russian. If our Bolshevik friends hear that you can speak their language then so be it.’ Edrich’s attention switched to Robbins. ‘We decided not to let on that Hutton speaks Russian—thought it might be an ace up our sleeve. Sir Walter, we have not yet made contact with the American consul as we have been awaiting your arrival. Do you think you we should contact him immediately? Perhaps we could meet for dinner this evening?’ Robbins nodded and Edrich looked at his watch, ‘gentlemen, may I end the meeting there as I wish to get my notes off to Plasov and Compton.’

Chapter 46

The American consul, Denys Compton, arrived for dinner at the hotel. Compton had a mane of dark hair, was clean-shaven with a powerful pair of shoulders and narrow waist that indicated he might be a sportsman. Edrich guessed Compton's sport might be or have been boxing because he had two or three small scars round his eyes he looked about thirty-five years old. Denys' smile was warm and welcoming and his handshake firm but not crushing.

As they sat Compton identified several police agents that were sitting in the hotel restaurant all trying to get as close as possible to the group's table. Compton therefore recommended that they say as little as possible about business matters and keep the conversation not only personal but confined to things the Bolshevik already knew about each of them. The mission members were happy to follow the recommendation but it meant that because Compton and the British Mission did not know one another the conversation was stilted.

The Compton family were from Chicago about which Edrich knew little and demonstrated it by asking such questions like 'Is Lake Superior the most beautiful of the Great Lakes? Can you see it from your home?' At which Compton responded with a laugh, a smile and the comment 'Chicago is beside Lake Michigan and that it is superior to Superior as far as looks go.' It was at the end of the meal when everyone was getting to their feet with the attendant noise of scraping chairs when Denys Compton said. 'I am going to see Plasov, tomorrow in the late morning why don't we go as a group? That way I can vouch for your Mission with the Commissar.'

'According to Hutton and the colonel I gather that Plasov is a bit of a tartar, if that is an appropriate term for a man who is a European Russian.' Robbins said scraping his chair hard against the floor that set everyone's teeth on edge.

Compton pulled a face in anguish as he replied. 'As a man his bark is worse than his bite. I suspect that because some of the government are,' he paused and looked around, 'happy to reduce the population preferably by foul means. That puts everyone in the government under pressure either to act that way or to appear to act that way.'

The Group moved to the door and said their farewells. As the British party turned towards their hotel Compton called out. 'Colonel Edrich,' Edrich turned towards the American whilst his companions stopped, 'next time I see you I'll bring an atlas and show you 'The Great Lakes' and the towns that lie beside them.'

Everyone laughed and then Edrich performed an exaggerated bow before he replied. 'Thank you Mr Compton and then perhaps you can advise me on the purchase of my retirement home—one that has a superior view of Superior, of course.'

The following morning in a burst of energy Hutton left the hotel after an early breakfast and went and found Captain Anders, the Swedish Red Cross Officer. The Swede was in a house that he was using both as an office and as his

quarters. Hutton introduced himself and found Anders extremely happy to speak in English.

'I was so afraid that I am losing my English this will give me practice,' said Anders as he led Hutton into an upstairs room full of papers and boxes, piled on the floor and scattered on a very large packing case that was clearly his office desk. 'Excuse the mess, Captain Hutton, but I have had no help since the Bolsheviks took over. The lady who acted as my clerk disappeared along with her family several months ago. Take a seat but be careful it is very unstable.'

Hutton balanced on the chair gingerly. He frowned at Anders with the air of a man who was expecting to be deposited on the floor at any moment.

Anders laughed. 'So what is an English officer doing here? Are you lost?'

'No, I am with a mission who is visiting Tashkent just to find out what's happening here. It was suggested by my commanding officer that I pop along to see you to find out what is happening to the POWs now that Russia is out of the war.'

Anders picked up a pencil and began to tap it against his teeth as he stared at Hutton. He balanced his chair onto its two back legs for a moment but when there was a crack he quickly returned it to all four. 'Where are you staying?'

'The Grand.'

'I heard there were two men purporting to be British Officers at the hotel and that a man who was part Chinese joined them yesterday.'

'One of those was me and the other military man is Colonel Edrich. Sir Walter Robbins, who used to be our consul in Kashgar, and is now the political leader of the mission has a Chinese father. When the mission is over Sir Walter is going home to England through Russia. The colonel and I have not been here before. Sir Walter has visited Tashkent on several occasions in the recent past, so there must be someone here who can vouch for him.'

'Whoever did that would probably be shot merely for knowing someone British.'

'Surely you exaggerate?'

Anders stared at Hutton and then said sharply. 'No, I do not exaggerate. This man has retired and is going home through Russia at this time?'

'Yes.'

Anders shook his head in bewilderment, 'I admit I have heard of, but never met, Sir Walter. Going home through Russia seems most odd given the current situation.' Anders stared with boring eyes at Hutton as if in the deep recesses of Hutton's mind lay the answer.

'As I said, Captain Anders, we are here to find out exactly what the situation is in Turkestan because it may affect us in India.'

'Have you any papers, Captain Hutton? I would just like to check you are who you say you are.'

Hutton shook his head and rummaged through his pockets but the only thing he had was a dog-eared postcard from his brother in France. The postcard was one of those that had a series of boxes against which was such text as 'I am well' or 'I received your last letter'. The 'I am well box' had a tick so when Hutton held up the postcard Anders' reaction was a shake of the head and a smile.

'Not formal but it will do. Met anyone from the government yet?'

'Plasov yesterday, but it was not much fun. Today the colonel, Sir Walter and the American Consul Compton, are going to meet him again.'

'Good you have met, Compton.' Anders took Hutton's smile to be yes because he went on. 'I have to be careful on what I say and to whom I say it. If I may I should like to meet with Sir Walter and Colonel Edrich. Perhaps you can arrange it as quickly as possible? In return I will give you what information I can, provided I do not think it too sensitive.'

'I understand. I will arrange for you to meet everyone perhaps tomorrow or tomorrow evening for dinner. This evening we are going to the cinema.'

Anders stretched and yawned. 'Perhaps I will go as well. Who knows? Perhaps they will have a Charlie Chaplin film? Now questions?'

'Exactly how many prisoners are there in Turkestan and around Tashkent?'

'Exact figures are difficult because since the war ended the POW camps have not been guarded as they were. I would say that,' he reached over for a folder and looked inside, 'there are about fifty thousand German and Austro-Hungarian POWs in the whole of Turkestan, of which twenty five thousand are in and around the city of Tashkent.'

When Hutton expressed surprise and said that the figures they were expecting were four times that number Anders looked grim then he told Hutton.

'The Russian authorities have said that there never been more than a hundred and thirty to a hundred and fifty thousand prisoners in Turkestan at any one time. I only came to Tashkent at the end of last year so I have no way of knowing if those figures are in any way accurate. Of those POWs held in camps in Turkestan, over the last four years, we estimate about two thirds of them have died from diseases like cholera and typhus and that other problem common to this area—starvation. German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners, perhaps as many as sixty thousand, were apparently transferred to Siberia last year ostensibly because it has a better climate. Rather I should say a different climate because I understand the mortality rates of POWs in Siberia are nearly as high as here.' Anders then added quietly after pausing to think, 'the Bolos have never been too concerned with the POWs but with matters of a political nature. So Germans I think here now,' Anders stared at the wall and wagged his head, 'probably no more than five to eight thousand.'

'How many POWs are serving in the Bolshevik army, or police and what are the nationalities of those prisoners?'

Anders groaned: put his hands behind his head: removed them; jammed his elbows on the table and cupped his chin in his hands. Again he stared at the wall for several seconds, 'I reckon that the number of Germans who have joined the Bolsheviks number about a hundred, probably half that number of Austrians. But the largest recruitment for some reason has been of Hungarians,' he paused to calculate, 'say three hundred men. However, these troops are those found in and round the city. There may be a lot more POWs out fighting counterrevolutionaries along the railway.'

'What are the rest doing?'

'The remaining POWs are scattered around the city getting work where they can, others still live in their POW camps and try and get work on farms.'

Basically all the POWs other than those in the Revolutionary army are living a hand to mouth existence and a perilous one at that.'

'Are they armed? Could they easily become an army again?'

Anders shook his head as he laughed. 'No, they are unarmed and disorganised. These are men at the end of their tether. I am hoping to try and repatriate these soldiers to their homeland but my attempt at repatriation seems to be at the bottom of the local Soviet's agenda.'

'Why?'

Anders frowned then shrugged. 'Repatriation would probably be done by train. Twenty-five to fifty thousand POWs going home by rail takes a lot of organisation and requires many trains. The trains transporting prisoners then cannot be used for anything else, like transporting cotton—not that I know anything about that. I am assuming that the trains can even get to Krasnovodsk through the front lines of the Bolos and their opponents—I've heard British?'

Hutton snorted, 'we were told that cock and bull story yesterday. I don't believe for a moment we have troops in Russia – it is all Bolshevik propaganda. Who is commanding the Germans?'

'There are two men I will mention. First, a German captain by the name of Beckelmann has taken it upon himself to try and organise the German prisoners. He has done this for two reasons - first to prevent them volunteering to join the Bolshevik army and second, as a Prussian, he is totally committed to the Kaiser and he thinks that the prisoners could be used to wage war on the British.'

'You said earlier that the Germans were disorganised though.'

'Correct. I did not say that Beckelmann had succeeded in his task but he is trying.'

Hutton looked and felt puzzled. 'Only a captain leads the Germans? Are there no more senior officers?'

'The Bolsheviks,' Anders stopped and thought for several seconds as he searched for the right words, 'have a passionate dislike, for officers and in particular for senior officers—say colonel and above. This Bolo dislike has been translated into the execution of many of the Russian Imperial officers of senior rank, sometimes I gather on a whim of a particular Bolshevik. I think the German senior officers have noted this Bolshevik behaviour and have decided to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible. Not,' he rummaged through his papers till he found what he was looking for, 'that there are many senior officers in captivity just two or three colonels and we do try and get people home first who might be vulnerable to Bolshevik retribution just because of their status. There is a Lieutenant Sailer who joined the Bolsheviks. Sailer is the most senior German to do that and he acts as a recruiting officer amongst the POWs. Needless to say Sailer and Beckelmann are at complete loggerheads with one another.'

'What about the Austrians?'

'The Austrians are the province of a Danish officer, Major Bohr. Major Bohr is currently visiting some of the Austrians at Andijan. The Austrians POWs are different from the Germans because there are the pure Austrians and then

other nationalities. The non-Austrians POWs are from the ethnic groups found in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Hungarians I've already mentioned but there are Serbs, Albanians, Slovaks, Czechs, Bosnians and Croats who have also joined the Bolos. Most of the majority of the POWs just want to go home. Captain Zwemmer leads the Austrians in the Bolo ranks you'll have to ask Bohr about him and his role. The Austrian Empire is crumbling and some of the non-Austrians from the Empire will probably join and fight for the Allies. Indeed, I understand former Czech POWs are already an army, have switched over to the Allied side because they are promised their own independent country by the Allies. I would not be surprised if other nationalities wanting independence do the same. When Bohr returns I will make sure he visits you and clarifies the situation about the Austrians.'

Hutton who had made notes of all that Anders had told him thanked Anders. Hutton promised he would introduce the Swede to the rest of the mission if he came to the cinema that evening.

As he was leaving Anders said to him, 'Tonight when you attend the cinema take a haversack you will find that useful.' At that Anders winked and closed the door. Hutton returned to the Grand hotel puzzled by the final remark but as the others had left for their meeting with Plasov he could not discuss it with anyone.

Chapter 47

It was clear to Edrich when he, Robbins and Compton met Plasov for their meeting the latter had respect for the American consul. Plasov accepted Compton's statement that he vouchsafed for Robbins' and Edrich's official status as British officials. Plasov expressed surprise that an American Consul, who represented the anti-imperial President Hickson, should plead on behalf of an Imperial power from which they, the Americans, had successfully rebelled. Compton replied that Great Britain and America were now allies in the fight the democracies were having with the autocracies of Germany and Austria-Hungary. For the next twenty minutes Plasov harangued the three men opposite with Bolshevik propaganda—all of it against imperialist capitalists.

When the Russian paused for breath Compton interjected that his government would be concerned over the breaching of the German blockade by the sale of cotton to the Germans. Edrich wondered why Compton had not included Turkey and then remembered that the United States was not at war with it. Plasov replied to Compton's statement that he waited for Moscow's judgement on what to do about the cotton and the British Mission's status. Until he received a response from Moscow Plasov stressed, he would continue to treat the Mission as unofficial.

Robbins protested but only received a shrug in reply so he did not pursue it further instead he switched topics. 'Comrade Minister, yesterday after Colonel Edrich and Captain Hutton visited you the hotel where we are all staying was

raided by the police. All of our rooms were searched. Nothing was taken but they made a very great mess. This is intolerable behaviour. We are a diplomatic mission and whilst you await Moscow's decision as to our status we should still be treated as representatives of His Majesty's Government.'

Plasov sat back in his chair, smiled and then opened his arms in supplication. 'The searching of your room is a police matter. I have no control over any of the police. Their job is to protect our government, which is what I suspect they were doing. If you wish take it up with them do so—don't bother me I cannot do anything as you are unofficial.' Plasov sounded exasperated.

'Comrade Minister, can we return to the sale of the cotton to the Germans?' interjected Compton.

Plasov loudly sighed, then narrowed his eyes before staring at Robbins and Edrich. 'Thanks to the cutting of the railway line by the Counter-Revolutionaries, with or without British help, nobody can move the cotton at the moment even if they wanted too and that includes us.' Plasov grimaced, 'we have not sold cotton to the Germans. Perhaps you could listen to me when I said we await orders from Moscow about the cotton.'

'I heard cotton is leaving by Tashkent by camel train is that going to Germany?'

Plasov's face grew sour, 'Mr Compton, I hardly need to remind you that we still have our own needs. Any cotton leaving here is for our factories in the west it is not going to Germany. Perhaps the governments you all represent should think of us and our needs for a change.' Plasov thumped himself in the chest with a forefinger, 'if you do not want the cotton to go to Germany then give us a better price for it when the time comes. I will not comment further on this subject. Now I have some questions.' Plasov paused and looked at Robbins intently, 'you, Sir Walter, are retiring is that correct?'

'Yes.' Robbins wondered how the man knew.

'Then why are you here?'

Robbins cleared his throat not because it needed it, but because it gave him time to think. 'I wish to go home through Russia and then Persia as it is much faster than going back through India. Then we have a dearth of Russian speaking officers so it was thought useful for me, a Russian speaker, to help the colonel and the captain communicate with your government.'

'You are not a military man but,' Plasov's gaze moved to Edrich, 'Colonel Edrich is. So why replace you a Russian speaking non-military man, with a military man who cannot speak our language?'

'Colonel Edrich speaks Chinese and has just started to learn Russian. It is common practice for soldiers of the Indian Army to move into the political service and become consuls throughout India. There is a tradition that they keep their military rank. So when these former military men are promoted in the political department their military rank adjusts accordingly - it is a just an honorary title. I can assure you the colonel is here for a political purpose.'

'I am so glad that you can give me that assurance, Sir Walter,' Plasov said sarcastically. 'I suppose your interest in the POWs you claim is political?'

'Yes,' echoed Edrich and Robbins.

'Did you fight in the war, colonel?'

Edrich thought about lying but decided that Plasov's look indicated that he might know something. 'Yes, Commissar, I am now unfit for active service and that is why I have returned to political service and why I am here now.'

Plasov smiled, 'And Captain Hutton?'

'He has been injured and ill, Commissar. So he is learning to become a political officer by watching Sir Walter and myself,' Edrich forced a smile.

Plasov's eyebrows shot up as he listened, 'how cosy.' His attention switched back to Robbins. 'Did you know that the railway lines were cut between here and the west, Sir Walter?' Plasov's tone sharpened, 'how did you expect to get home through Russia? What was your intended route?'

'I did not know,' Robbins hesitated whilst he selected the right words, 'when we set out Commissar that Russia would be in such a state of upheaval. Kashgar is a long way from anywhere so we get little news. Routes to the west of the Caspian I understand may be or, is barred by the Turks and Germans. Therefore, I was going to go by train to the Krasnovodsk, sail from there to Enzeli before going through Persia to the Persian Gulf and then sail for home.'

Plasov grunted at the last comment as if he accepted it, then with a wave of his arm at the door he indicated the meeting was over. Plasov said he would meet the British again when news on their status arrived from Moscow.

As the three men walked back to the Grand Hotel Edrich asked Compton about the police in Tashkent.

'There are three police forces. First, the official police who do the usual police job of patrolling the streets and keeping order at a benign level - they don't seem too bad. Second, the secret police, the Cheka, who I believe report directly to the Soviet. These are the police who are everywhere and they arrest people for no reason and kill them without explanation. In the massacre of the local tribes that took place earlier this year these Cheka were mostly to blame. Third, are the military police that seem to have exactly the same powers as the Cheka but report to the army authorities. It is hard to tell the last two police forces apart.'

'Do you know why we have two or three people following us but at different distances from us?' Edrich asked.

Compton laughed. 'Nobody trusts anybody so we are all followed by members of each force.'

The three then discussed where else there would be agents of the police. The hotel was an obvious place with Compton estimating that at least one person on each floor would be a spy. He also said that some of the waiters in the restaurant would be spies, particularly if they spoke English. When Robbins made the rejoinder that the waiters would be unable to speak English, Compton replied that some of the hotel waiters were from Austria-Hungary and had worked in Britain or America before the war.

Compton then asked whether their rooms had been searched yet and after listening to first Robbins and then Edrich's experience he said. 'Describe this man who you said was the leader.' Edrich did so at which Compton grunted before replying, 'that is Chevosky the head of the Cheka. If that man threatens you, take heed. He was in prison for murder and the Bolos freed him. After the problems the Europeans had here last December with the Sarts they decided

they needed the nastiest person in Turkestan to run the murder show—Comrade Chevovsky.’

‘Why would the chief come on a room search?’ Robbins pondered.

‘He did the same when I first arrived which I suspected was just to have a look at me and also demonstrate his power. Do not expect the search to be the last, although Chevovsky won’t necessarily always appear.’

On arrival back at the hotel Compton accepted Edrich’s offer of listening to Hutton’s report of his meeting with Anders. Robbins scepticism about Compton attending Hutton’s debriefing was conveyed to Edrich by a look and a raised eyebrow. The scepticism disappeared as Compton filled in some of the details that Hutton had missed for example the fact that the POWs got extra food if they joined the Bolsheviks’ army. Almost sheepishly Hutton mentioned the need to bring a haversack to the cinema that evening without having a clue as to why Anders had said he should. Compton suggested that Anders was sympathetic to the allied cause and would have had a good reason to tell Hutton to bring the bag.

Chapter 48

‘Where is General Muncerville? And where are the thousands of British soldiers the government here promised,’ asked Arslanian commander of the Armenian army.

‘We did not promise thousands. We have over a thousand well armed and trained British soldiers. These men should be enough, with help from our Bolshevik friends,’ Keyworth inclined his head at Martov, the returned Bolshevik Army commander, sitting silently sprawled across a chair a few empty seats down from the Armenian, ‘to keep the Turks out of the town.’

‘A thousand is not enough. There are three times as many Turks as there are defenders.’ Arslanian said looking at Martov, as if for support, but the Russian sat unmoved.

‘We are fighting a defensive battle.’ Keyworth shifted his gaze between the two men opposite him—they remained expressionless.

‘We do not want to fight for the Imperialist British,’ Martov eventually growled without changing his posture.

Hagopian, the political leader of the Baku Bolsheviks, interjected, ‘Moscow says we must not fight the Turks or Germans and that you should not have brought us back.’

‘You know what will happen if the Turks arrive,’ said Keyworth to both Bolsheviks opposite him. The pair sat still and silent.

Arslanian then turned and shrugged at Keyworth and said without conviction. ‘If we were not to oppose them, which we cannot unless we have Bolshevik support, then maybe they’ll leave us alone.’

‘Our sources say many of their soldiers are not Turks but Tartars, Azeris and other Azerbaijani tribes. The Azerbaijanis will remember the Armenian

massacre of their people and will want revenge.’ Keyworth replied then switched his attention to the two Bolsheviks. ‘Surely you Comrade Hagopian, as an Armenian, and you Comrade Martov, as a Russian and a co-religionist of the Armenians, will help?’

‘I am a communist as is Comrade Martov. We both believe in Karl Marx. Wars between religions are no concern of ours, are they general?’

‘No,’ Martov replied.

‘You cannot leave without the government here’s approval. Is it not better to fight because to a Tartar you will always be an infidel?’

Martov’s expression remained emotionless, whilst Hagopian merely looked at his hands which he kept clasping and unclasping in his lap. Fernee when he had finished translating raised his eyebrows at the colonel as if to say—“what’s wrong with these people?”

Keyworth fought to keep his temper and said, ‘I think we have done all we can Captain Fernee. Ask if we can go round the front lines so we can position our men to give the maximum support to their troops.’

There followed a long discussion between Arslanian and Martov about whether that was allowed. When Keyworth asked Fernee why the Bolshevik should have any say in the matter when he was banned by Moscow from fighting Fernee could not elicit an answer. Occasionally Fernee would translate in a whisper what was being said. At one stage Keyworth nearly blew his top when he heard that both the Bolos opposite said that they should be saying where the British troops should go, not the British Colonel. Finally the British officers were grudgingly given permission to visit the front.

Chapter 49

Compton arrived at the cinema that evening with Captain Anders. This was to the relief of Edrich and Robbins as Hutton had retired to bed incapacitated by back pain. Anders willingly accepted Edrich’s invitation to sit with the Group. Edrich thought that the cinema was in a converted stable because the pervading smell of horses and their manure was overpowering but after a short time the film, a comedy, dulled his nasal sensibilities as he laughed at the little man called Charlie Chaplin. Amidst the laughter engendered by the film Anders whispered to Edrich that they undo the straps of their haversacks then nothing else happened during the film. It was during the next film, a French made melodrama, that Edrich felt Anders push garments into his lap. A few moments later Edrich, after looking round the cinema, slipped the clothing into his haversack. At the end of the films as they all left the cinema Anders shook hands with everyone beginning with Edrich into whose hand the Swede slipped a piece of paper. After saying good night to Compton, Edrich and Robbins walked back in silence, to the hotel.

‘Do you think Anders is on the level?’ Edrich asked Robbins as they climbed the stairs to their rooms.

‘That is something I asked Compton and he says he is pretty sure the man is genuine and unlike some Swedes he is pro-Allies. Why? Was it something to do with what he passed you?’

Edrich thought for a moment. ‘Yes. I will see exactly what he gave me, before I tell you about it. Ignorance is bliss, so if we have a visit from our police friends who saw him passing me the stuff you are not involved—that’s important.’

Robbins smiled grimly. ‘This mission is turning out to be rather different to what I expected or at least hoped for.’

‘Can I ask, Sir Walter, was there an American consul in Tashkent before Compton?’

‘No, there has not been an American consul here since I was posted to Kashgar in 1890, though someone may have passed through at the end of last year.’

‘It seems an odd place for an American consul to be out here miles from anywhere.’

‘Not like us British—eh Bill?’

Edrich laughed, ‘but at least we have reasons: the protection of India; the cotton and the POWs. How long has he been here? Is he not telling us something?’

‘Well the reasons you have just given for us would be exactly the same reasons for him and America. He has been here since May. He sent a letter to Kashgar telling us who he was as soon as arrived here. It might behove you to find out more when the opportunity arises.’

‘I will. Good night to you.’

‘Good night to you, Bill.’

Once back in his room Edrich opened the haversack and examined its contents and that made him hope the police were not going to make a raid. He had to hide the contents—but where? For several minutes he pondered then he removed the threadbare pillow case from the pillow and stuffed the haversacks’ contents into it. He placed the pillow on top of the stuffed pillowcase and hoped it would work. As for the contents of the Swede’s note they made Edrich sit and think. His thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door and the entry of Bedi who asked him if he needed anything else that evening.

‘Yes, Bedi there is.’ Edrich beckoned the man to come closer, ‘I want you to acquire a German or Austrian army hat tomorrow in the market. Can you do that as early as possible?’

‘Yes, the market is open at seven and I think I should buy some fruit to cover up my hat purchase.’

Edrich smiled and nodded in appreciation. ‘Yes, very good, Bedi,’ Edrich took rouble notes out of his pocket, ‘that should be enough. Now when you go out on your own are you followed and how many people follow you and do they stay close?’

‘Three, but when I’ve been in the market they have usually kept their distance so I can buy the hat easily. As a Sikh I can say the hat’s for me if I am asked and I’ll try and get one that fits you but I’ll wear it back.’

Edrich laughed. ‘That would look good over your patka.’ Then he realised that there was something he needed done but could not do himself in the

circumstances so Bedi would have to do it, 'when you return here, can you come in from the back entrance?'

'I can but why?'

'I want you to memorise all the buildings, streets and alleyways at the back of the hotel. Try and seem unconcerned when you are observing your surroundings. If you need extra time for any observation pretend to have a stone in your shoe whilst you are memorising whatever it is. When you get back to the hotel, draw me a map of what you have seen and bring it to me.'

'God this is a tight fit,' Edrich was struggling with the Austrian Army jacket Anders had put in the haversack. 'This is even worse.' The German cap that Anders had given him had been so small that when Edrich put it on it had perched fez like on his head. The cap was so small that Bedi had been unable to trade it for a new one—that he had to buy.

'Yes,' said Robbins, 'I think our Captain Anders was expecting Hutton to fit it. As for the hat all you can hope for William is that the wind never gets too strong. It's a motley disguise so it fits in with what we see out there,' Robbins giggled.

'Hutton is always ill. I know I should have some sympathy for someone who is lying flat on his back on the floor but in these circumstances I can't find any. I should be meeting Plasov with you and Compton.' He took his disguise off and replaced them with his own uniform. He moved to the table where he had spread the map Bedi had drawn for him.

'I think you are beginning to enjoy this cloak and dagger stuff,' said Robbins. 'What are your plans?'

'I'll let you know if I enjoy my spying when I come back.' He stabbed his finger at the drawing. 'That's where I'm meeting Anders' contact in about half an hour provided all and sundry are creatures of habit.' Robbins looked questioningly but Edrich shook his head. 'Still maybe best for you that you don't know any more than you need to.'

Robbins looked at his watch and stood up. 'I think it is time to report to India and I wonder whether these Bolsheviks will let us. I assume Plasov has asked to see us this evening because he has heard from Moscow. How do I explain your absence to everyone?'

'Tell him that Hutton is incapacitated and that I am worried about him. I also have a cold, no a headache—they clear up quickly.'

Chapter 50

To: General Harris—Simla

From: General Barber—Meshed

A company of infantry, the 19th Punjabis, and a machine-gun detachment of the Royal Fostershire Regiment, based in Persia, crossed into Russian Turkestan several days ago. These troops were under orders to support the Ashkhabad FTU Trans-Caspian government and its troops

in their fight against the Bolshevik forces based in Tashkent. The whole force is under the command of Brigadier Fishlock, with Colonel Squires commanding the Punjabis.

I have the honour to report that the Fostershire's machine-gun detachment has already fought with honour as it covered a retreat of the FTU forces from the railway station at Dushakh. This retreat of the FTU troops from Dushakh station was in the face of overwhelming superiority of Bolshevik troop numbers. British casualties were nil Bolshevik casualties are unknown. The FTU and the British troops now have set up defensive positions at the station of Kaakha some two hundred miles west of Dushakh.

This, Colonel Routledge, is the first time since the Crimean war sixty odd years ago that British and Russian troops have fired on one another. Odd when you think in all that time we were expecting war with the blighters to break out during the "Great Game" of the nineteenth century—it never did. Now it has finally happened ostensibly when we are still allies—well with some Russians.'

'I wonder where it will end though, sir. I have been looking at the map and these Bolos are moving steadily west, too steadily by half, sir.'

'With our lads behind them these FTU troops will soon push them back, mark my words.'

Chapter 51

After Keyworth had been granted permission to visit the front he and Fernee went there early each morning. After one visit they returned to the hotel to find it surrounded by angry women who appeared to be waiting for them. As the two men pushed their way through the crowd the women kept asking, 'where is our bread?'

Colonel Oakes close to apoplexy met them half way up the stairs as they were returning to their rooms. He burst out without even a "Good morning." 'Martov's done it again. The swine's gone and done it again!' When he saw Keyworth's questioning face he added. 'The bugger pirated some ships in the night and set off to Astrakhan with Hagopian and the rest of the last government. Luckily the loyal Caspian fleet went after him again. And the navy stopped him again. Now this you will not believe,' Oakes paused for effect, 'rather than bringing Martov back to Baku like they did last time, the loyal Caspian navy and the Bolsheviks are having a pow-wow at sea. Apparently the Caspian Navy cannot decide what to do.'

Oakes held his hand out and gesticulated towards a window that pointed to the west. 'Johnny Turk is waiting a mile outside town to come in and plunder it and the Bolos disappear? Martov ought to be shot for cowardice because that is all it is. I think this claim that Martov was ordered by Moscow not to fight with us is nothing but hooey. That Hagopian is just as bad. Hagopian is an oily

Armenian and far as I am concerned he is a complete and utter non entity and how he led a government I just do not know—he should be shot as well. He paused for breath, ‘we could pressgang the Bolsheviks if and when they return to Baku. We desperately need men.’

‘I know, I know but I have never been one who believes that conscripted men make good soldiers and they can affect the morale of other soldiers,’ responded Keyworth.

‘Not all the Bolshevik soldiers on those ships may feel the same way as Martov, colonel.’

‘The problem, Colonel Oakes, is that the Armenians who you think would be determined to keep the Turks from Baku, bearing in mind the history between the two nations, do not appear to be so. On our visit this morning we found one of the Armenian machine guns abandoned, its crew had deserted their post and come into town. The reaction of their commander was “well they’ve got families”. Tell the general what you said, captain.’

‘That if the Turks arrived they probably wouldn’t have an intact family for much longer and that it was better to fight the Turks outside, rather than inside the town.’

‘The Armenian replied “well it’s a free country” and then he shrugged with a damn surly look on his face.’ Keyworth looked as he felt—exasperated. ‘But whatever happens, Colonel Oakes, we must not let these Bolsheviks keep the weapons they took. Can we get anybody on the loyal ships to seize the weapons the Bolos stole and bring them back here? If these ships let the Bolsheviks go to Astrakhan—sobeit—we cannot worry about those blighters.’

‘I will try but all these people are you say, so obstreperous. They keep harking back to the fact that we brought so few men when we promised more. Anything you or I suggest they seem to ignore. Anyway we will ask them to radio the ships to do as you ask.’

The two colonels stared emptily at each other for several seconds. Fernee wondered if he should leave the room.

Eventually Keyworth spoke. ‘Any good news? Anything to cheer me up?’

‘General Muncerville is coming across with the remainder of our men from Enzeli either tomorrow or the day after that.’

Keyworth clasped his hands together and looked up to the ceiling and muttered, ‘thank you.’

Fernee cleared his throat. ‘Colonel Oakes, when we were coming into the hotel we were surrounded by women asking us for bread. Do you know anything about that?’

‘Unfortunately I do, captain!’ Oakes un-crumpled a piece of paper he had held screwed up in his hand. ‘Sorry about the state of this.’ He waved the paper, ‘I had just got this when I heard about Martov’s escapade. You both better have a read.’ The paper went via Keyworth to Fernee. The paper read:

‘Armenians have no fear of starvation. The English army is our saviour because they have bread. Bread will be handed out free at the Hotel Europe. There is plenty of bread for everyone. The English have promised us—everyone will eat!’

When Fernee had finished reading and was about to ask the obvious question Oakes forestalled him. 'The women appeared on the streets this morning many of them waving copies of this paper. One source thinks the paper was distributed by Turkish supporters, but I think it is far more likely to be Bolshevik inspired.'

'Why?'

'The Bolsheviks still have major support in the town, the Turks less so. Whoever it was is immaterial because we still have to tell those poor souls outside the truth.' Oakes looked contritely at Fernee. 'I am sorry captain but as you are the only one of us who can talk to those people, you will have to tell them. Sooner rather than later may be the best policy. Don't forget about the radio.'

Fernee spoke to a member of the government about radioing the ships to bring the Bolos back before he headed out of the hotel with Colonel Keyworth's batman holding a chair. Once outside Fernee stood on the chair and then shouting as loud as he could he told the women about the bread or, more correctly the lack of it. Many of the women who thronged the hotel forecourt spoke only Armenian and they refused to believe the women who translated Fernee's explanation in Russian. Other women at the back of the crowd obviously could not hear what was being said and eager to get what they thought was on offer, constantly pressed forward. Several times Fernee was almost knocked off his chair as the crowd swayed forward, back and side to side. Only when the women inched their way to where Fernee stood on his chair repeating his explanation could they see he did not have any bread. That done those women then had to fight their way back from whence they came and then the crowd degenerated into a pushing and screaming mob. It took Fernee over two hours to get the crowd dispersed and none of the women went home pleased, or enamoured of the British. As for Fernee his throat felt as if it had been rubbed vigorously with coarse sandpaper.

Whilst Fernee placated the crowd Oakes visited the police to ask them to try and find out who had printed the document. The policeman Oakes saw expressed puzzlement as to why in the current circumstances it was important to find out that information. Oakes explained that it was important because if it had been a Turkish agent who had sponsored the document they might try further propaganda that could undermine the current government and its will to fight. After nearly an hour of cajoling and argument, Oakes was given a policeman to act as a guide based on the claim that the man knew all the town's print shops. Oakes and his policeman picked up a hoarse Fernee from the hotel.

The policeman's visit to the various shops criss-crossed the city to the annoyance of Fernee and Oakes who would have liked rather less walking and rather more organisation. The accompanying policeman not once asked a question of any shop proprietor unless directed to do so by Oakes who had great difficulty keeping civil with the man; at one stage Fernee thought the colonel was going to shoot the man but sense prevailed. Fernee's stomach was beginning to rumble when the policemen announced that the next shop was down near the docks and that would be their final destination. As they

approached the docks townsfolk were thronging excitedly down the street until they could get a view of the sea. Ships were approaching the harbour, others were already entering it—the Bolsheviks were returning.

The impact of these ships returning to Baku on the policeman was extraordinary: when the three men entered the printing shop the policeman produced for the first time, the flysheet about the bread; he interrogated the shop owner without any prompting from Oakes; he adopted a threatening posture that he had used nowhere else and the owner looked cowed.

Finally the policeman turned round and spoke in Russian. 'This man printed the sheet. He says that the man paid him in Imperial Rouble notes. He also said that the man was a Tarter.'

'Had he seen the man before? If not would he recognise the man again? Would he give a description?'

The policeman and the owner spoke for several minutes and from time to time the policeman made notes. At the end of the conversation the policeman said 'No, he'd never seen him before. He thinks he would recognise him although the man came when it was dark. Here is his description.' Fernee took the notes the policeman had made and began to translate it into English.

'Between five feet five and five feet eight inches tall, thickset, dark hair, dark moustache, male naturally, age between thirty five and forty five and dressed in traditional tartar dress.'

The two officers exchanged glances. 'Wonderful, there are thousands of Tartars here, captain, could be anybody.'

'Yes,' replied Fernee as he was thinking. 'One thing though. If it was not a Russian or an Armenian then it was not a piece of mischief that we can place at the Bolshevik door or some dissident Armenian group opposed to the government.'

'This means that the man probably is a real Turkish agent. So then we need to find him before he creates more mischief. For that we have to get the police involved because we cannot act without them. I suppose that will be another visit to the police station. Explain to our friend here that we need to find this chap. Perhaps we should do that outside rather than in here.' Oakes raised his eyebrows as a means of pointing at the shopkeeper. 'We do not want him hearing.'

The three men left the shop and stood watching one of the Bolshevik ships tie up alongside one of the port docks. Fernee explained to the policeman about the need to find the Tarter. The policeman seemed excited at the prospect of a manhunt and waved his descriptive notes in the air as he promised to make a report on his return to his station, which he would do immediately. Much to the two officers surprise he turned on his heel and walked away from them at a rate of knots that far exceeded any speed he had shown earlier.

'I suppose we have to trust him, colonel?'

'Yes. Tomorrow morning however I will go down to see the chief of police just to make sure'

Chapter 52

The morning after the return of the Bolsheviks to Baku General Muncerville steamed into the harbour. As soon as his ship docked Muncerville hurried to the Europe hotel and demanded an immediate report on the current situation. He listened in silence as he was told: that the Armenian soldiery was deserting the front each day; that there was no barbed wire in front of the trenches and the latter were often aligned so badly that their occupants could only fire into the air. Muncerville looked slightly happier when he was told that the Turks remained immobile in their positions. Muncerville looked even happier when he was told that the Bolsheviks who had fled on the ships had been allowed to leave yet again for Astrakhan after they had handed over all their weapons and ammunition to the Armenians—which the general said prevented them cluttering the place up as useless articles requiring food. The twenty-six commissars who had made up the Baku Bolshevik Government however had been arrested and held in Baku.

Oakes then gave his report on intelligence matters. First, the bread flysheet and the failure of the police or his own contacts to yet find the Tartar suspect—the search continued. The bread fly-sheet had created anti-British feeling in the town but this was expected to dissipate following the general's arrival. Second, many Muslims in the town were refusing to fight or, if they were pressed into fighting they were often deserting and taking their arms with them.

Keyworth and Oakes then joined together to complain about the lack of support they received from any of the new Baku Government's officers. The two also complained that there seemed to be a committee for everything. Oakes, then described that when he gone to the police station to ask for help, to find the flysheet Tartar, five policemen sat round a table for two hours discussing the importance of this task vis-à-vis all their other commitments. One man had been assigned to the task of finding the Turkish agent to which Oakes said he expected a result by 1920.

Whilst Keyworth and Oakes were making their reports a ravenous Fernee was eating a less than hearty breakfast of two tiny eggs and some dry bread of indeterminate age in the hotel restaurant. Fernee had just wistfully finished his last mouthful of food and was taking a sip of thin coffee when Oakes' batman arrived to inform him that Muncerville wanted him immediately. Fernee left the table with a backward glance in which he hoped that miraculously the breakfast he had just eaten might have reappeared.

The room that the mission had been using as an office contained only a tiny table pushed against a wall whilst on its other three sides sat Muncerville, Keyworth and Oakes. Once Fernee had been introduced formally to the general he was invited to sit down a procedure that took several minutes. The room was so small that to allow Fernee to sit, the table and chairs had to be reorganised. The two senior officers, Muncerville and Keyworth, kindly held papers aloft swaying this way and that until the table was placed in such a way that all four people could perch round it. When the senior officers plonked their papers

down on the table some slid off. Keyworth and Oakes then bumped their heads together as they stooped in unison to pick them up. Fernee was just about to make a jocular remark but saw the general looking none too pleased at the shambles around him. Finally the four men managed to sit at varying distances from the table. The variable distance from the table related directly to the length of each officer's legs, Oakes being closest and Muncerville furthest.

Muncerville told Fernee that he had had wonderful reports about his work and attitude from both the colonels. Fernee was just about to thank Muncerville when the latter held up his hand and reached for a telegram, which he then glanced at as he spoke.

'I have here a telegram from General Barber in Meshed. It says in essence,' Muncerville lowered the telegram and looked at Fernee, 'where is my Captain Fernee? I need him to report to me as soon as possible. Please ask him to return to Krasnovodsk immediately. Muncerville put the telegram back on the table. 'I would like you to stay here and work as my interpreter. How would you feel about that? If you say yes I will send a telegram to General Barber informing him that you are joining my staff. There will be fighting here.'

It took Fernee half a second to reply. 'I would be more than happy to join you general and happy to see action.'

'I must point out, captain, if you could return across the Caspian you will also find action there that might stop you returning to Meshed.' Muncerville exclaimed.

'Has there been another revolution and our friends have been overthrown?' Fernee said fearing the worst.

'No, General Barber has supplied military support of both Indian and British troops. Two days ago they were in action along the railway line.'

'I would still rather stay here.' Fernee looked pleadingly round the room.

'Good man, Captain Fernee. For your information Colonel Keyworth will command our troops in the front lines. Colonel Oakes will draft a telegram for General Barber today telling him that you are to remain under my command. Colonel Oakes will be your commanding officer and your role will be that of gathering intelligence on the Turks and any agents that they may have here in Baku. Clear?' Fernee nodded. 'Good. Now, I am going to attend a meeting with the local government and you Captain Fernee, will accompany me.'

Chapter 53

Bedi entered Edrich's room and picked up his bag then without a word he led Edrich down the stairs then via the lounge to the gentlemen's cloakroom. Bedi and Edrich passed no one on their journey. The cloakroom was empty because, as Bedi had found out, its attendant always ate at this time of the evening in the kitchen—nobody replaced him. Once in the cloakroom Edrich opened the bag and removed its contents. Edrich put on an Austrian army jacket and a pair of German field grey uniform trousers. Bedi who was listening at the

cloakroom door whilst Edrich changed gave him the all clear signal. Edrich looked comical but Bedi refrained from smiling. Edrich climbed through a window and dropped to the ground before he stood up with his back firmly pressed to the wall. He waited and listened. When Edrich heard nothing he put on an Austrian Army cap which Bedi had purchased in the market. The cap was slightly too big so Edrich had to tilt it slightly to see under its peak.

As soon as he heard Bedi close the window Edrich walked the few strides into the hotel courtyard, stopped and watched. On one side of the courtyard at right angles to the main part of the hotel were stables where Edrich could hear the horses moving. In the courtyard three motor cars and a lorry were parked in a row. In one of the motor cars Edrich could see a man sleeping at the wheel whilst another car was being cleaned by a man working at a snail's pace. Opposite the stables Edrich were the kitchens and through its lighted window figures flitting back and forth.

Edrich was just deciding on the most surreptitious route out of the courtyard when he heard a noise. The man cleaning the car had thrown his dirty water on the ground and had begun to walk towards the stables swinging his squeaking bucket round in his hand. Edrich waited until the man had disappeared and then swung his haversack up onto his shoulder so that it hid his face from the stable side and started through the courtyard. Edrich walked with his knees bent in an effort to make him appear smaller to anyone who might be looking.

At the end of the courtyard was a tree that looked out into the wide service road that ran at the back of the hotel and the adjoining properties. Noiselessly Edrich reached the shelter of the tree from where he could see that the road was dusty and rutted by motor and horse drawn vehicles. Edrich heard then watched the car cleaner traverse the courtyard without a glance in Edrich's direction. When the man stooped out of sight to clean the running board Edrich stepped out from underneath the tree. He turned right and set off towards the main road that he could see about a hundred yards away. Edrich walked past gardens and stables and saw only one man grooming a horse but the man was too engrossed in his work to notice the oddly dressed figure.

When he reached the end of the service road Edrich stopped. He now pulled the cap peak as low as he could before he looked at his boots covered in dust. Edrich took a rag from his pocket and as he wiped off his boot he casually looked towards the corner of the road that led to the front of the hotel. He could see a couple of men lounging against a wall on the far side staring down the street towards the hotel entrance. On the nearer corner were three men in animated conversation though one was clearly looking towards the hotel.

'Captain Hutton, follow me, please.' A man dressed in navy blue trousers, a khaki jacket and a grey cap said as he walked past. 'Please don't talk to me,' the man added in heavily accented English out of the side of his mouth.

Edrich followed the man along the road passing Russians, Sarts, Austrians and Germans none of whom gave him a second glance. The pair eventually entered the old walled native part of the city where Edrich had difficulty keeping his eyes on his guide because of the crowd that thronged the streets and his cap peak kept falling over his eyes. Eventually they came to an open square packed with people selling everything from fruit and vegetables to

clothes. The guide led the way to a corner of the square where the press of people was less and where there was a café selling tea.

At one end of the café three tables pushed together around which were seated men nearly all of who wore all or part of a German soldiers' uniform. Edrich could not speak German but recognised that was the language being spoken round the table. Most of the men were listening or trying to listen to a slim faired haired man with pince-nez glasses; the man wore the uniform of a captain of the Imperial German army; strapped to his waist was a revolver. Two men, displaying revolvers beneath leather jackets, stood guard behind the captain. The captain stopped speaking and sat down to drink tea and look at papers.

Edrich's guide led the way to a corner that had a ledge where sat Captain Anders writing something in a notebook. Edrich's guide went and spoke to Anders who stood up and spoke to the guide before flicking through his notebook and marking something in pencil. The guide sat on the ledge whilst Anders beckoned to Edrich.

'I expected Hutton.'

'Hutton is ill.'

Anders motioned at the Germans sitting round the table. 'That is Sailer the man in the complete German uniform,' the Swede said quietly. 'Sailer is going to try and persuade some of the men here to join the Bolsheviks. You and our friend here are Czech if anyone was to ask. Your friend will do the talking if there is any to be done. You're here to see me because Bohr the Empire's POW officer is out of town.' Anders was leafing through his notebook before he stopped on a page and made a mark he then looked up, 'I recommend you keep your head down and as soon as Sailer finishes speaking you leave.'

Anders moved off and went round the men sometimes marking something in his book and sometimes not. When Anders reached Sailer the latter stood up and began to argue with Anders; soon every German joined in the argument some seemed on Anders side others on Sailer's. Sailer turned and said something to one of his revolver bearing guards and the man moved forward and seizing Anders by the arm led him away from the table and pushed him out of the café. Anders put his notebook in his haversack and after nodding at some of the men standing beyond the perimeter of the tables he disappeared into the square.

Sailer and some of the men continued their argument till eventually all but the former sat down. As Edrich sat, waited and watched more men gathered round the table till eventually he could not see Sailer unless he stood. One of the late arrivals said something to Edrich's guide who replied. The newcomer said something to Edrich, and then repeated it.

'Six,' replied Edrich in Tibetan.

The newcomer nodded as though Edrich's greeting was exactly what he was expecting because he smiled an acknowledgement before he turned towards Sailer. Suddenly Sailer was standing on a chair and was beginning his oration; as he spoke he pumped his arms and gazed with a sweep of his head and eyes round the men gathered at and around the tables. Edrich counted forty-eight men. Edrich pushed his cap forward onto his forehead and put his elbows on

his knees with his hands covering as much of his face as he could. When Sailer's gaze arrived in his direction Edrich moved his body so that the man standing in front of him obscured Sailer from him. For the next half an hour Sailer's hectoring voice resonated round the café sometimes supported by shouts of approval at others with silence. Suddenly there was a commotion emanating from the square and without thinking Edrich stood up.

The source of the commotion was a party of men led by a German infantry captain whose uniform was complete though worn. The new captain shouted first at Sailer and then at the men round the tables. Edrich was pulled back into his seat as the whole mob of soldiers began to shout and then to push one another.

'Beckelmann,' said Edrich's man handler who now grasped Edrich by the arm and guided him into the square as surreptitiously as he could. The shouts and arguments of the Germans filled the square which rapidly emptied of all non-Germans. Without a backward glance Edrich's escort strode purposefully out of the square en route to the hotel with Edrich just behind him.

When the road past the rear of his hotel was reached Edrich stopped and slipped into a doorway. His guide strode to the next corner turned left, crossed the road and disappeared. Edrich waited and surveyed the scene but he saw no obvious police trackers lurking on any corner and assumed they had moved closer to the hotel's front entrance. Edrich watched men with watering cans sprinkling the dusty street in an effort to keep the dust down. After a look at his watch and another survey of the scene he stepped out of the doorway and turned down the service road. When he reached the rear of the house next to the hotel he stopped. The house's garden was divided from the road by a low fence along which were dotted trees and bushes. Edrich climbed into the garden and went to the wooden shed tucked up against the wall dividing the house from the hotel. Edrich retrieved the bag of clothes that Bedi had hidden amongst the garden debris of old pots, broken tools at the back of the shed. Edrich changed his garb, checked the road and seeing no one he crept to the tree in the hotel's courtyard and waited. The car cleaner was gone but there was a man standing in the courtyard facing the hotel smoking a cigarette.

Edrich lit a cigarette noisily. The man turned and appeared to study the courtyard then having done that he did something to his turban Edrich quickly went and stood by him. The two men then walked towards the hotel puffing on their cigarettes deep in conversation in Punjabi. On arrival at the back door although the cigarettes were only half smoked they were happy to throw them away. The man who attended the lavatory was sitting in his usual spot outside that place and just inside the back door. He looked up in surprise when he saw Edrich enter with Bedi.

'Here you are,' Bedi handed a packet of cigarettes to the attendant; 'the colonel did not like them at all,' Bedi looked at the colonel and repeated it in Punjabi.

Edrich pulled a face, made as if to spit which he followed by phlegm generating sound at the back of the throat.

'You can keep the money I gave you for them.'

The attendant laughed but peered suspiciously at Edrich. 'I didn't see him go through the back door. I could get into trouble.'

'No, you will not!' Bedi shook his head violently. 'The colonel left whilst you were hunting that clean towel for me in your cupboard so you didn't see him leave. Finding towels is your job isn't it, not looking at who goes outside for a smoke.' He mopped his brow and handed the towel back.

'Why is he carrying a bag when all he's doing is having a smoke?'

'Europeans have strange habits,' replied Bedi looking bewildered.

The attendant went to say something but thought better of it and looked round to see if anyone was watching him—there was not. Edrich and Bedi walked away from the cloakroom locked in conversation and entered the lobby to be greeted by a puzzled hotel manager. The manager looked at Edrich suspiciously wondering at his sudden appearance from the direction of a rear door.

'It is nice to smoke outside, said Edrich, 'but you are the manager so I suppose you can smoke wherever you want. Here,' the manager took a look round before accepting the proffered cigarette.

'Thank you, colonel, Sir Walter and Mr Compton are eating in the hotel's restaurant and they are expecting you.' The manager looked at Bedi dismissively and the Indian turned on his heel and left.

The Anglo-American pair was sitting by an open window and had already started their meal. 'We've decided to start out late meal without you, colonel,' said Robbins balancing rice on his fork.

Compton added in a loud voice. 'And you colonel were working on reports I gather. That must have been most enjoyable for you and the reason you are late.'

'Yes, I quite forgot the time.' Edrich looked at a man sitting at an adjoining table who was trying both to eat and to lean as close as he could to the group's table. The man, Edrich observed, almost lost his balance twice in the short time since he'd arrived.

After dinner they left Compton in the hotel bar smoking a cigar whilst Robbins went back with Edrich to his room. The room again was checked for listening devices before they began to discuss recent events. Although Edrich had counted of forty-eight men at the café because of the state of the men's uniforms he felt it was hard to know if they were all Germans or included some Austrians. Edrich didn't admit he'd forgotten to ask Anders, who would have known, whether the men present were a mixture of nationalities or all Germans but he told Robbins of the shouting match between Beckelmann and Sailer.

'So there is tension amongst the German,' Robbins said nodding with pleasure, 'good'.

'What happened with Comrade Plasov?'

Edrich was told that his presence had been missed and that as head of the mission he was expected to attend all future meetings with the Foreign Commissar of the Tashkent Soviet. The crucial thing that occurred at the meeting was not the discussions about cotton or the POWs, but finally Plasov said that a communication to India was acceptable provided it was transmitted en clair. A key question to be solved was to whom Robbins and Edrich should

address their communication. In the light of their dubious position in Tashkent the pair decided to write directly to the Viceroy asking for official Government of India status for the mission. Writing directly to the Viceroy might further reinforce the mission's claim to be political rather than military. The Viceroy would surely tell Simla that he'd got a telegram from the pair.

As to content the pair debated was whether they should raise the question of the invasion of Russian Turkestan by British troops in the telegram. They knew that Plasov would get a copy of any message they sent so if Edrich and Robbins did not mention the British invasion Plasov probably would want to know why not. The invasion was to be mentioned in their telegram but if and when a response came from India Robbins wondered if the Viceroy might deny the invasion. The pair began to speculate on what would happen then.

Edrich offered, 'from what we have heard about the Bolos they are likely to shoot us.'

'I don't know about that,' Robbins said pensively. 'Massacring natives is one thing murdering British Officials is quite another. I think they'll think twice before they do that.'

'I hope so, Sir Walter. Of course if the Bolsheviks do expel us I wonder if they insist that we return to Kashgar or whether we have to go out through Persia.'

'That may depend on whim, timing or the weather.' Robbins stood and turned to go and then stopped, 'we've discussed what you'll write and you can send it off straight away. We can't take any chances about Plasov changing his mind. I have to do something now which at this moment I prefer not to say what it is—as you said sometime "Ignorance is bliss".'

Edrich would have preferred to know what Robbins was actually going to do but accepted the other's secrecy. As Edrich watched Robbins disappear from the room he wondered if Compton was going with Robbins and that was why the latter had gone into the bar rather than going home. Edrich waited a few minutes then stood by the window just in time to see Compton and Robbins emerge walk up the road with their six police shadowers behind them. Edrich looked down at his own shadowers all of whom were staring up at his window. Edrich almost waved but instead closed the curtain, sat at his table and began to write the telegram.

To: His Excellency the Viceroy of India—Lord Denbigh

From: Lieutenant Colonel Edrich—British Mission to Tashkent

We beg to inform you that all members of the mission have arrived safely in Tashkent.

Comrade Plasov the Tashkent Soviet Foreign Minister awaits instructions from the Moscow Government as to whether the mission can be granted official status.

Cotton though available here awaits Moscow's instructions on what can be done with it. These instructions we expect to be - sell to the highest bidder. It should be pointed out that moving the cotton by rail is not currently possible because of cessation of train services to the west. The only movement of cotton for Russian internal use has been by caravan.

We have been informed that German POWs are to be repatriated and we assume this will be simpler than expected because their numbers have diminished through illness so that only twenty five thousand remain in Turkestan. Many of POWs work to help the local government and economy a few help the local government keep order.

It is claimed here that British troops have been involved in fighting the Bolshevik troops further west from Tashkent, along the railway line. We have stated to the local Soviet that we have no knowledge of British involvement and that we are sure that this is a false claim.

Compton the American consul in Tashkent is supportive in our dealings with the local government officials.

Edrich showed the telegram to Robbins over breakfast who gave it his approval. Edrich with Bedi walked down to the town's telegraph office after eating. The office held no customers when the pair entered but there were several clerks—a mix of tribesmen and Europeans—who were working at desks whilst two armed Europeans stood idly chatting to each other. The office went quiet as soon as Edrich and Bedi approached the counter.

Bedi explained to a nervous Turkic clerk that he wanted to send a message to India and handed him the message. The counter clerk took it gingerly and disappeared into an office at the back of the room followed by one of the armed guards. Voices could be heard in the room before the door opened and a tall lean European wearing a white shirt without a collar and black trousers came out carrying the message and disappeared into an adjoining office again followed by the armed guard.

After a few minutes the second office's door opened and a European in a part German and part Austrian uniform stood holding the message and looked at them. The man was of medium height with sandy receding hair and like nearly all the POWs that Edrich had seen in Tashkent he was thin. The man said something over his shoulder and the first European reappeared and they spoke for a few moments in what to Edrich sounded like German. The red headed man nodded and moved to the counter while the armed guard who had disappeared into the office reappeared and moved close to the counter as if to eavesdrop.

'What do you mean bidder?' The redhead pointed at the word that related to the purchase by the British of the cotton. He spoke in a heavy German accent.

Edrich explained what he meant by the word and then spent the next half an hour explaining many of the other words and phrases that he had used. From time to time the redhead made notes. When the redhead seemed satisfied he disappeared into his office where the white shirted European and the guard joined him. The Sart who had served them had meanwhile re-appeared but refused to answer any questions. After an age the office door opened and both Europeans returned to the counter.

'This message is to the Imperialist British Governor we cannot send it,' the white shirt man said.

The redhead followed up this with, 'down with all Imperialists.' His partner nodded vigorously and clenched his fist that he waved in the air.

Edrich drew himself up and looked the white shirt man in the eye and said in his most commanding voice. 'Comrade Plasov has told me that I can send a message. Please telephone him and' he was just about to add "he will confirm my story," when he stopped himself and said, 'tell him I am waiting here whilst his orders are being disobeyed.'

'No, I will not do that,' the white shirt said in what, to Edrich, sounded like a voice riddled with uncertainty.

For the next half an hour the office was filled with the sound of argument about whether the Bolo pair would agree to contact Plasov's office about this matter; Edrich argued in English with the redhead, Bedi in Russian with white shirt. Suddenly the two telegraph officials stopped and after a whispered conversation without a word to Edrich they returned to their office and shut the door with a crash.

Bedi asked the Sart, who had originally served them, and who had resumed his place at the counter what was happening but the man refused to answer. The sound of raised voices could be heard emanating from the officer then there was silence for a few minutes before the office door opened and the two Europeans emerged and returned to the counter. The redhead told Edrich that the message would be sent on payment of the appropriate fee. Promptly Edrich paid and it was with a feeling of relief that he and Bedi left the telegraph office and took a therapeutic walk round the town. It was late afternoon when they arrived back at the hotel where Edrich reported to Robbins.

'Would you believe I went down to the telegraph at about nine o'clock and left about half past twelve? All I wanted to do was send a telegram and in plain text.' Edrich gasped still out of breath from his march. 'I needed a walk so I spent the afternoon strolling about observing the POWs: selling fruit; moving furniture; painting houses and shoeing horses. They do not look like a threat to India. What about you?'

'I secretly met someone last night by arrangement through Compton. This was my first and hopefully last, attempt at cloak and dagger stuff—I'm just too old. We had some concoction in this cafe we went to and whatever it was thankfully it made me go to the toilet almost willingly. Whilst pretending to be sick in this ghastly place I met the man Compton wanted me to meet. I met the man for barely more than a few minutes I just could not cope with the smell,' he pulled a disgusted look on his face, 'it was awful. This man wanted to talk about soldier stuff. So I said he needs to talk to you—will you takeover this undercover work?'

'Of course, can I ask who this person is, Sir Walter or is it to be a complete surprise?'

Robbins started to laugh and shook his head at his own forgetfulness. 'I am most terribly sorry, William. I'd forget my head if it wasn't stuck on. Nicolas Sokolovsky is the man you are to meet. Have you heard of him?' Edrich shook his head. 'Well he is a Russian archaeologist who specialises in the Silk Road. He has visited me several times in Kashgar and I stayed with him when I was here in 1912. Nicholas is from a Russian noble family. He was luckily absent during the revolution and counter-revolution that occurred in Tashkent last December. If he had been here at that time he thinks he would have been

murdered. Since Nicholas returned from an expedition in May he has been keeping his head down to avoid being noticed by the Bolsheviks. Because of his background Nicholas is anti-Bolshevik and he tells me that he is secretly in touch with the Sart military leadership. He told me this afternoon that the Sart leaders, who apparently retired to the country after their counter-revolution failure, only need a bit of bolstering to try again. Nicholas is also in touch with some Russian anti-Bolsheviks who he thinks will throw in their lot with the Sarts in order to overthrow these Bolos. Nicholas needs to talk to you because he feels this group will need British military help. I told him that only you can properly advise them.'

'If he is an archaeologist what has he to do with military activity?'

'Nicholas is a very intelligent man without, I grant you, military experience. However he is: a good organiser; a clear-headed thinker; a natural leader; has wide contacts; is anti-Bolshevik and is widely travelled outside and inside Russia. Go and see what he has to say and then decide what action we can take.'

Chapter 54

Muncerville's meeting with the Baku government was less than successful. The first thing the five man Baku Government Dictatorship did was to accuse General Muncerville, almost before he and Fernee had sat down, of betraying them by bringing so few troops. The Government's Chairman then stated to a chorus of approval that the lack of British support would mean that the Turks were bound to capture Baku. Muncerville countered by denying that he had said that he had promised to bring more soldiers than he had. Muncerville said that all he had told the government envoy, who had come to him at Enzeli to ask for help, was that he hoped that more troops would be sent from Mesopotamia to join him.

Muncerville then stated in as calm a voice as possible that indeed Baku would fall if the Armenian soldiers guarding the city continued to desert in the numbers that his officers were telling him they were doing so. There were howls of disapproval from the Armenians at this last remark with several deputies leaping to their feet shouting and screaming. Fernee thought that at any moment one or two members of the government would leap across the table at the two officers but Muncerville's size, made them think twice. One of the Government Committee who had a louder voice than most of his fellow members eventually said.

'General Muncerville our army is a revolutionary army even without the Bolsheviks. Because we are revolutionaries each man makes his own mind up whether to obey an order or not—that is freedom.'

The room burst into applause and then a heated discussion began in Armenian.

Muncerville and Fernee sat quietly until the room fell calm once again enabling Muncerville to announce. 'The soldiers who I brought with me are as I speak moving to the front line.' There was a murmur of approval by the committee sitting opposite the British officers. Muncerville studied his hands which he held for a moment pressed together, fingers outstretched. He touched his lips with his hands and then spoke slowly and deliberately. 'I propose that I take charge of the complete defence of the town including all Armenian troops. That way I can bring co-ordination and discipline to the whole army. It is the only way I believe that we can defeat the Turks.'

As soon as the words had sunk in, and at least two of the committee were obviously poor Russian speakers and had to have some of Muncerville's translated for them, a discussion broke out. A show of hands was made at the end of the discussion and five hands were raised at one point.

'The committee says no. We will not have Britain establishing a foothold here and then find we cannot get rid of you,' announced the chairman.

To Fernee's surprise Muncerville did not argue. That left just one thing to discuss and this Muncerville had deliberately left till last. 'Chairman, gentlemen, I insist that three ships be set aside in Baku harbour for the exclusive use of my command.'

'You are going to run away!' one of the deputies shouted in English. His voice soared above another cacophony of Armenian as the deputies argued and shouted at the chairman or the British Officers almost on a rota basis.

'Keyworth and Oakes told me it would be like this.' Muncerville raised his voice until it reached the decibels that a Guards Sergeant Major would have been proud. 'I need these ships,' the room quietened, 'to ferry supplies, remove casualties and bring up possible reinforcements.'

'And to escape if necessary,' said the Armenian who spoke English.

'Yes,' replied Muncerville, with an honesty that surprised Fernee.

Yet again a discussion in Armenian broke out. Muncerville waited patiently before he again spoke. 'I am responsible only for the safety of my command so I need the ships. If I am allowed to command all the forces here then perhaps I won't need them. Will you change your mind?'

Surprisingly bedlam did not break out again but the discussion was animated and lasted nearly twenty minutes. On two occasions there was a show of hands and each occasion the two Britons could see that the vote was five to nil.

The chairman eventually spoke. 'We have come to two democratic decisions. General Muncerville, we will not allow you to command our soldiers but we will give you three ships.'

A few minutes later when Muncerville and Fernee left the room they could hear another argument break out amongst the government members. On leaving the building Muncerville took out his watch.

'That was a twenty minute meeting that has taken just over three hours. It does not bode well for us, Captain Fernee. So what about your intelligence operations do we have any agents?'

‘Major McWilliam before he left gave Colonel Oakes the names of people that he used. I think with the town invested we’ll get some information but I fear it will be limited. I do have hopes of one chap though.’

Muncerville neither replied nor broke his stride as the two men walked back to the hotel. As they were entering the hotel a Turkish shell landed a few streets away.

Chapter 55

‘Statham! Statham! Have you read this?’ Barber waved a telegram at Statham before the latter had managed to get all of his body through the door.

‘It was, “Your eyes only”! I thought it best not to look at it.’

‘Well you can guess can’t you? You know where it is from.’ Barber put the telegram down on his desk and shook his head in a manner that made it abundantly clear what he thought of Statham’s inability to be telepathic or to know the contents of a telegram that he had not opened.

Barber’s voice lowered to a level that could only be heard by anyone within a thirty yard radius—Statham was about two yards away. ‘General Muncerville has offered Fernee the chance to join his staff in Baku and Captain Fernee has accepted. You know anything about this?’

‘No, general,’ Statham replied as he thought how lucky Fernee was to be out of Barber’s command and began inadvertently to smile.

‘What the devil are you smiling at? I have repeatedly said that,’ he spoke the following words emphasising each word by banging his clenched fist on his desk. ‘I will not have junior officers deciding on a whim to go off and join someone else’s command. It will not do. Why has he not come back I told you to do that – well?’

‘Absolutely disgraceful,’ said Statham and would have liked to have added “that Fernee had not done it sooner”. ‘It might have been General Muncerville who asked Fernee to stay. I understand that he needs Russian speaking officers.’

‘I know that. There’s no need to state the obvious, colonel. Muncerville should have written to me first and then I would have told him that it was impossible for me to let Fernee go. I mean India deliberately put Fernee with his skills at my command. Muncerville reports to Dexter in Baghdad, doesn’t he?’ Barber without waiting for an answer snapped, ‘I will send Dexter a message. I know him well we were in Poona together - a fine chap. I will ask him to order Muncerville to return my man.’ Barber looked at Statham as if for support.

Statham winced as he said, ‘I think we could give General Muncerville another chance to send Fernee back.’

Barber pondered as he wondered what would show him in the best light—maybe Statham was right for once. ‘Write it straight away then, Statham be tactful but firm—remember it’s your suggestion.’ Statham was opening the door

to make his welcome escape when the voice boomed out, 'what about Captain Cowl? Where is he now?'

Statham knew Barber deliberately got Mawle's name wrong. 'Captain Mawle is in Krasnovodsk and he could join the soldiers we have sent over the border. Statham tried to control himself but failed. 'Captain Mawle was sent by London to blow up the Russian railway, maybe he is doing that.'

'I do not care what his name is so stop repeating yourself. Whatever his name is does not alter the fact, colonel, that he was useless as a cipher officer. Yes, he was sent to blow something up that did not exist, using tools he had never used—the man is idle and completely useless. A touch of field action will either make or break him. I learnt the hard way, now he must. Assign him to Brigadier Fishlock's command immediately.' Barber started to mutter, 'blow up a railway he couldn't blow up a balloon—he'd have trouble finding, what do they call that bit of the balloon they blow into Statham?'

'The blower, sir.'

Statham returned to his office sat and composed the telegram with a face like thunder.

To: General Muncerville

From: General Barber

Captain Fernee is mine! He was given to me for my own nefarious purposes by India. India trusts me completely because they know that I am doing a wonderful job! As always! If I had time I would learn Russian but I am too busy and need Fernee. My goal is to get to being a Major-General on my way to being a Lieutenant-General whilst I suspect you have reached the zenith of your career—a mere Brigadier. I am not to be trifled with about Fernee who is mine. Send him back by return or I will report you to General Dexter who I knew at Poona—his dog serviced my bitch and Dexter's wife had one of the puppies. I might actually write to India get them to do some work—it beats playing polo every day. Hope everything is well with you.

Statham read what he had written and then tore up the paper into tiny fragments and dropped them in his waste basket. He then wrote something he could send.

Chapter 56

The 'I thought you might want to read this, Lord Surrige.' Grimes held a piece of paper in his outstretched hand.

The tone in Grimes' voice made his Lordship stand up from his chair and grab the paper. He read it quickly then put his hands on his hips before looking at Grimes with a shake of the head. He read the paper again in case its contents had somehow magically changed. His lordship walked over to the wall

and banged his head against the wall gently a couple of times before turning to Grimes, who had a look of “I can’t believe it either,” on his face.

‘Tell me Grimes; do you think if I bang my head against a wall that I will knock any sense into it?’

‘No.’

SurrIDGE snorted and held out the paper, which was a copy of the telegram that Harris had received from Barber concerning the engagement by British troops of the Bolsheviks. SurrIDGE held the paper as though it had leprosy. ‘If you had said yes I think I would have gone straight over to the War Office lined them all up and bashed their heads against the wall.’

‘You might damage the wall, Lord SurrIDGE.’

SurrIDGE raised his eyebrows and gave Grimes a look of exasperation before saying, ‘actually, this is no joke though, Grimes. Supporting the local Trans-Caspia Russian Government in Baku against the Turks is one thing. Fighting on behalf of the Trans-Caspia Government against the Bolsheviks, who are the current unofficial Russian Government, in Turkestan is quite another matter.’

‘The War Office should have talked to us before they told Simla that Meshed could make the decision to provide Trans-Caspia with military support against the Bolsheviks. A Brigadier-general should not be making what are in effect strategic decisions.’

‘No, Grimes, they bloody well should not!’

‘I am surprised that you did not hear about the War Office passing responsibility over to Meshed in this matter at your last Eastern Committee meeting.’

‘Probably thought starting a possible war with Russia was very minor stuff. What were they thinking letting Barber of all people have this responsibility?’

‘What about how it will impact the Tashkent Mission?’

SurrIDGE’s anger dissipated as he remembered. ‘Good point. Well I suppose they will be declared persona non grata and expelled to Kashgar.’ SurrIDGE frowned, ‘there is a problem—these Bolsheviks do not appear to follow normal rules. They might treat our chaps as hostages or even worse as spies.’

‘Surely, they would not dare!’

‘My dear Grimes any group who can murder their legitimate ruler, the Tsar, and all his family including women and children can murder anyone.’

Chapter 57

‘Ambassador Bolotnikov, here to see you Major Washbrook.’

‘Really,’ said Washbrook surprised, ‘show him in.’

Bolotnikov entered the room slowly. He looked drawn and tired. When Washbrook offered him a seat the Russian sank down into it gratefully. Washbrook offered the Russian a drink, which he accepted with less than his usual alacrity. As soon as Washbrook’s servant had poured the vodka and left

the room the Russian took a huge swig from his glass; Washbrook almost called his servant back to pour the man another but decided to wait.

‘Thank you major.’

‘I am surprised you are back here, Ambassador. Is Mrs Bolotnikov with you? When did you return?’

‘So many questions and I am so tired.’ Bolotnikov studied his glass then finished its contents in one gulp.

Without a word Washbrook got the bottle and poured the man half a tumbler full, which the Russian acknowledged with a smile.

‘My wife and I had to return because we were reliably informed that the Bolsheviks would shoot us if we went on to Tashkent from Andijan. The journey back was terrible because we met a Bolo patrol. These Bolsheviks stole most of our money and jewellery, the wife saved a pittance. If those swine control Russia for very long major then I fear the worst for the country I already fear that I will never see Moscow again. Now I have no official status I think I will go see our Ambassador in Beijing and see if we can stay somewhere in China.’

‘Sir Walter and the colonel are they on the way back or with you?’

‘They were booked to go to Tashkent by train on different days because the service was intermittent. Their servant Ghulam Ahmad left Andijan several days after we did and joined us short of the border—not clear why he was sent back.’ The Russian took a swig from his glass.

Washbrook jotted the facts down on some paper. ‘Soldiers and border guards how were they?’

‘The border guards still seem to remember the old days. They were courteous both when we were going over the border and on our return. We saw Bolshevik patrols on our journey out but they did not bother us. When we came back we met a band who robbed us. They could have killed us but they did not and that is why I have come to see you.’

Washbrook sat back mystified. It must have shown on his face because before he could speak the Russian went on, ‘we came back with a group of people that we met in Andijan. All the people were Europeans except for two Indians.’ The Russian leaned forward with an intent look on his face, ‘now when we were stopped and robbed by the Bolshevik patrol that took our money we were close to the border. I am sure this band of ruffians was going to kill us or take us prisoner and back to Andijan. Things changed immediately the Bolo leader spoke to one of the Indians, Mohan Lal.’

‘Did you hear what was said or see what was happening?’

‘No. All I know is that the Bolos’ belligerent attitude changed after they spoke to him. Not that they gave us our money back.’

‘Did Lal speak to you at all?’

‘A little bit. He claims to be a tea merchant who has been in Tashkent for several years and now wishes to return to India. I don’t know why but I had an uncomfortable feeling about him. I asked him about places in Tashkent and he did not know some of the places I would expect him to.’

‘I will talk to him if he wants to go to India because he will need a passport. What about the Europeans—any suspicious characters there? Was Ahmad with you at the time these Bolos robbed you?’

'No. Ahmad was not with us when we were robbed. When he did join us he had only the clothes he was wearing and said he had not eaten for two days and the way he ate, I can believe that. As for the Europeans they all seemed genuine refugees – but who knows. One of the women, a young widow Madam Volkov, lost her jewellery as well as her money to the brigands. She'll have to stay with us until she can find a route to America where she has cousins apparently. If you can help her to get a passport for India I am sure she will be grateful—she is pretty.'

The Russian leered for a moment to himself whilst Washbrook smirked back at the Russian. 'I'll do what I can but my government needs me to keep a firm control on granting access to India. Any message or report from Sir Walter or the colonel?'

'No, I was not given anything.'

'That is a surprise as they are on a fact-finding mission.'

'Perhaps they remembered that I am a Russian and didn't trust me.' Both men laughed. 'I actually left Andijan only four or five hours after I arrived so hardly enough time for Sir Walter or anyone else to learn or receive anything. The one thing I did learn however was that the people we spoke to thought the mission party were the vanguard of a large invasion force. Those people we met said they would welcome it—but I suppose they would tell us that.'

'India will be interested in that rumour. Anything else?'

'Only that the Bolshevik patrol had people in it who spoke German and I think I heard another language which may have been Hungarian. All the soldiers wore a motley collection of uniforms only some of which I recognised. The soldiers were really a very scruffy lot and I heard that some of them are straight out of gaol and therefore doubly unpleasant.' The Russian stood up and finished his drink before putting his glass down with a flourish. 'I am very tired and I must go back to Mrs Bolotnikov she is distraught with our position.'

The Russian bowed to Washbrook before both men shook hands. Once the Russian had left Washbrook wrote a report of the conversation he had just had. Washbrook's report stated that all his information came from the ex-Russian Imperial Ambassador and that no information had yet been received from Colonel Edrich or Sir Walter Robbins but they were known to have set out for Tashkent.

Chapter 58

To: General Muncerville Officer Commanding Muncerforce

From: General Barber Officer Commanding Meshed

I must insist that Captain Fernee return to my jurisdiction immediately. Please see that he proceeds to Ashkhabad forthwith. Please instruct Captain Fernee on arrival in Krasnovodsk en route to Ashkhabad to telegraph me that he has crossed the Caspian and I will then provide him with orders as to his future role.

Ferne handed the telegram back to Oakes and looked miserable. Oakes put it on the table and picked up another piece of paper that he handed, with a twinkle in his eye, to Fernee.

To: General Barber Officer Commanding Meshed

From: General Muncerville Officer Commanding Muncerforce

Telegram received and understood. However, the value of Fernee to my mission cannot be exaggerated. I therefore with regret cannot release him at this time. I will endeavour to comply with your wishes as soon as it is possible to do so.

‘General Barber will not like this, colonel.’

‘Possession is nine tenths of the law. However, if you want to return to General Barber’s command General Muncerville said he would not step in your way.’

‘I wouldn’t want to do that.’

Oakes laughed. ‘I’ll say nothing merely telegraph this immediately to Meshed. That will be no doubt the end of it.’

Chapter 59

Edrich slipped through the back door of the hotel. He could see the lighted windows of the kitchen reflected into the area where now two cars and two horse carts were parked. Edrich watched the kitchen staff running busily about the place shouting, talking and laughing; nobody seemed intent on looking out of the windows. One man was smoking outside the kitchen door and when he had finished he dropped the butt and went back inside. Edrich slowly moved further into the courtyard and looked at all the hotel windows but no one appeared to be keeping a look-out. Where possible he kept the vehicles between him and the kitchen as he inched to the courtyard entrance. The main courtyard gates were shut this time but within them was a pedestrian door that was unlocked. Just as Edrich opened the door a voice spoke to him from the behind the tree close to the stable wall. The voice spoke in English.

‘Have you a match?’

There was enough light for Edrich to see that the man before him met the description Robbins had given. ‘They are English ones and they blow out in the wind.’

‘Colonel Edrich.’

‘Yes, Mr Sokolovsky.’ They shook hands and Edrich joined the man under the tree. ‘I have a cigar that Sir Walter asked me to give you.’

‘I only smoke Havana cigars and this is not, so I will have a cigarette instead. May I have a light?’ Edrich tried to light the man’s cigarette but after three attempts he gave up and handed the box to the Russian who succeeded with

the first match and inhaled deeply. The two men stood in silence for a while Sokolovsky enjoying his smoke. The two men watched the courtyard intently but apart from a groom who appeared from the stables and two kitchen men who had a drink squatting outside the kitchen door nothing untoward happened.

Sokolovsky broke the silence. 'I will keep the meeting short because of where we are. I am in touch with General Abenkov who is looking to remove these Bolsheviks. He does not know Sir Walter, but I can vouch for him.'

'What support does he have here and how is it organised?'

'I think he will be the best person to tell you. All I know is that he has been a commander of the garrisons at Kokand and at Merv. He has had no fighting experience against either the Austrians or Germans in the recent war. He tells me that there are many European supporters of our late Tsar who will follow him. He tells me that the Sarts also look to him for leadership but he does not think they make good soldiers. The fiasco of last November when thousands of Sarts were defeated by a mere handful of Bolos soldiers showed that. He thinks a few Europeans well led by him will soon have the Bolos on the run.'

'How many people, is many?'

'It is difficult to be accurate. Because of my background I know more about the Sart, also known as Bismachi, forces than the European numbers. There are thirty to forty Sart bands in and around Turkestan. The leader of the biggest band is Irgash who controls much of the land round Kokand and has several thousand in his band.'

'What do they believe in or why do they fight?'

Sokolovsky made a noise in his throat that indicated he wasn't sure how to answer that. 'I suppose freedom from Russia because the Sarts do not trust Europeans. That lack of trust is hardly surprising when you consider what Lenin said at the end of last year—"Organise your national life in complete freedom." When the Sarts here in Tashkent tried it a month after those words were uttered, they were massacred. Kokand thought it had achieved independence but as soon as the Bolshevik army of Europeans was strong enough in February back it came killing as many natives that they could—some freedom.'

'How many Sarts are there, how many are fighters and what do they need, Mr Sokolovsky?'

'I think there are about seven million Sarts in Turkestan of whom about a million and a half million are nomads. The number of Sart soldiers I estimate no less than ten thousand and no more than twenty thousand made up mostly of nomads. To answer your earlier question the Sart bands have different goals: religious; political; anti-European; economic; plunder and murder. As always they need money, arms and training. The problem is what happens here is that people seem to fight for one side and if that side gets beaten they just switch sides.'

'What about Bokhara that seems to have re-captured its freedom by force of arms?'

‘I wonder for how long. In would not be surprised if at some stage it suffers the same fate as Kokand and that means a lot of people will be murdered by the Bolos.’

Edrich wished he could write notes during the conversation. ‘General Abenkov what arms does his European army have? What is his proportion of cavalry to infantry or artillery? How does he intend to supply his army?’

‘Questions only the general can answer. I suggest that we arrange for you to meet him as soon as possible. I do know he wonders how much help he can expect from the British. The only question is how you meet him. I am not being followed, to my knowledge, neither is the general—perhaps the Bolos think he is too old to bother about. Do you have any suggestions?’

Edrich rubbed his chin. ‘I paint. Perhaps the general is an admirer of paintings. What I suggest is that I set up my easel somewhere and the general comes with you and accidentally sees me working. You and he can discuss my work’s merits and demerits.’

‘Where?’

‘Ordinarily I do not paint houses or streets. Perhaps I can paint the government house.’

‘You’ll have to get permission.’

‘I will try. Then I will let you know when. Do you have any news on the situation outside Tashkent? We heard from Plasov the Foreign Commissar that British troops have been involved in fighting along the railway against the Bolsheviks, what have you heard?’

‘Just that, though whether it is true I do not know. As for the rest this is what I understand: to the east there is a rising at Semirechie against the Bolsheviks; in the north, Cossacks have cut off the route to Orenburg; of course to the west the railway line is cut. So our Bolshevik government is virtually surrounded by its enemies—which bodes well for us.’

Edrich made a noise in his throat to indicate he was thinking, ‘what is your role in all this?’

‘Because of my background which is as both an archaeologist and scientist I have spent much of the last twenty or so years travelling in all parts of Turkestan. I am known and I am friendly with the Sart tribesmen particularly with the Kirghiz. I am therefore the link between anti-Bolshevik Europeans and the Muslims.’

‘Why are you anti-Bolshevik?’

The Russian dropped his cigarette and ground it out with a boot. ‘I am of noble birth, albeit minor noble birth. The only reason that I have not been shot is because my knowledge of Turkestan is useful to the government. Indeed only today two Bolsheviks, who I knew when they belonged to a different political party, came to see me.’ The Russian lit another cigarette, ‘they came to ask me about a route from here to the Caspian via the desert plateau of Ust Urt. They told me that if they could do that then communications with other Bolsheviks will be re-established.’

‘What did you say?’

'The truth, if I lied and said travel is not possible and they find out then,' even in the dark Edrich could see the man draw an imaginary knife across his throat. 'Needless to say I would prefer that not to happen.'

'Very understandable.'

'I think our time is up and I must return home.' The Russian extended an arm and Edrich shook the hand at its end. 'I await your communication, colonel.' Sokolovsky surveyed the surroundings for a full minute before he disappeared through the pedestrian door into the road.

Edrich scanned the courtyard and the hotel windows for watchers; he saw none. He crept to the back door which opened and Hutton stepped outside.

When he saw Edrich Hutton shouted, 'blast no matches.' Hutton then went back inside and loudly began asking the attendant for matches. The door opened and Robbins ushered Edrich inside.

Just as Edrich, Robbins and Compton were approaching the Foreign Commissar's office the following day they heard singing in German. Compton pulled the two Britons to the side of the road and the three men halted as a parade of troops passed them by. The first two groups of men were Bolshevik soldiers with their ragged mix of uniforms. Bringing up the rear of the parade was the third group singing powerfully in German were soldiers in leather jackets.

'Those Germans are the pick of the Bolshevik soldiers and their mere presence I feel keeps the Bolsheviks in power,' said Compton with a mixed look of admiration and apprehension.

As Edrich and Robbins watched the Germans swing past in unison suddenly from the other side of the road a German officer ran out to the leather clad soldiers. Edrich recognised the officer as Beckelmann. Beckelmann tried to stop the leather-clad soldiers and shouted at them coming up close to the columns and waving his arms about. One of the marching soldiers knocked Beckelmann's arm away a second soldier pushed the Beckelmann so hard in the back that the officer fell over. A German soldier ran from the side of the road and shouted at his Bolshevik fellow countrymen before helping Beckelmann to his feet. One of the German Bolsheviks began to unfurl his rifle so the soldier hustled Beckelmann to the pavement where some angry Russians started shouting at Beckelmann and his helper.

'Police,' said Compton indicating the shouting Russians, 'they don't like Beckelmann talking to any Germans who have joined the Bolsheviks. I think they must be worried that he might persuade some of the Germans back to the straight and narrow.'

'Why haven't the police arrested them,' queried Robbins as he watched Beckelmann and his rescuer move away from the Russian police.

'I think that if they were to arrest him then the rest of the German POWs could cause our Bolsheviks serious trouble. The Bolos are hanging on by the skin of their teeth—they don't need more enemies.'

Plasov still had not heard from Moscow as to what he should do about the British Mission despite this he seemed to be in an equable frame of mind when the joint British-American party joined him at his desk half an hour after the latter had watched the Bolshevik parade.

Compton as planned opened the proceedings. 'Commissar Plasov, the German POWs.'

'Not the Austria-Hungarian POWs as well? You have been at war with them since last December or have you forgotten them?' Plasov looked at the two Britons and smirked.

'No, I have not forgotten them and we will ask about them later,' responded Compton.

'Do you ask about the German POWs, not for their sake, but because you see Germany as a threat to your trade? Is it about the money you might lose if we sold our cotton to Germany or another country instead of you selling your crop?'

'Yes, I am interested in the cotton not falling into the hands of our enemies.'

'Your enemies are no longer ours. Our former friends, now allied to you, have invaded us and that changes everything.' Plasov switched his gaze to Robbins and Edrich.

Before Compton could reply Edrich spoke, 'we know nothing of any invasion of Russia by British troops as we have discussed before. As Consul Compton has said we are interested in POWs so,' he looked at Compton, 'I am sure the consul is happy to include the Austro-Hungarian prisoners.' After Compton indicated he was happy Edrich continued, 'may I ask how many Austrians and Germans you intend to recruit in your army? Should you not be allowing them to go home?'

Plasov exhaled and regarded Edrich with a bored look. 'Colonel Edrich many of the German and Austrian POWs long to return to their Imperialistic homelands to spread the Revolution. Many of them fired by the revolutionary spirit, they have found here, are happy to fight with us against the Counter Revolutionaries. When our enemies are defeated those men will go home and then we will support them against their local Imperialists.' Plasov picked up a pencil from his desk and began to tap his hand with it. 'Any Austrian or German POW who does not support our aim will be allowed to return home immediately communications have been re-established with the Caspian. I must point out that I have talked to Captain Beckelmann, about your mission.'

'You deal with him?' Robbins asked.

'Yes, don't look surprised Sir Walter. He is the representative of one section of the German POWs and he has the right to talk to me now that Russia and Germany are no longer at war.'

'But he is a soldier of a nation at war with you former allies.'

'Colonel Edrich, he is a POW and I might add that I know who he is and therefore what his status is. He quite rightly questions what you are doing here and why you are so interested in the German and Austrian POWs. And I have given you my reply except to add that Majors Bohr and Anders are the people we deal with over the POWs not you. That is the end of that matter.'

'But Commissar,' Compton leant forward in his chair.

'I said, Mr Compton, I am not prepared to discuss that matter any further. We will now discuss the invasion of Turkestan by the British which the British Mission, seated before me, claims to know nothing about. What I have decided

is to produce a prisoner from the fighting to prove to you that an invasion has taken place.'

'You have one?' Robbins glanced nervously across at Edrich.

'Not here yet, but one is on the way to me.' Plasov sat back looking pleased with himself and looked to see the reaction of the people sitting opposite. The American and the British sat stone faced at the news which if true, the latter realised, would put their lives in danger.

'Afghanistan,' said Edrich breaking the silence and playing a card he had held in reserve until such a time as this. It was information that had come originally from Anders via Hutton and a change in subject was definitely needed now. 'I gather that there are German and Austrian POWs serving with the troops you have on the Afghan border. May I ask what your intentions are there?'

Plasov began to get angry then held himself in check. 'If the British were to invade Turkestan, Afghanistan is a potential invasion route.'

'Do you believe that the British want to invade, Commissar?' Compton said in a voice that suggested that only a numbskull would believe such a thing.

Plasov laughed. 'I believe that Britain would try anything to acquire Turkestan and make it part of the Indian Empire. Are they not already invading us from Persia?'

Robbins leapt in quickly. 'Really, Commissar, India is much too far away from Turkestan to even think that Britain would invade you. Until recently Britain has been your ally and it still remains friendly to Russia so I do not think that suddenly we would develop designs on this province. We are still busy still fighting the Central Powers to worry about expanding our Empire. I do not think our Government wants either to acquire Afghanistan or use it as a passage for troops.' Robbins looked at the Commissar in the eye as he added, 'the Emir of that country is currently friendly to Britain a status that would change immediately if we were to try to send troops through his land.'

'I am sure that President Hickson would not approve of Great Britain invading Turkestan anyway,' interjected Compton. 'I am also certain that the British Government would take note of the President's wishes.'

'We shall see if you are right. Now I have an order from Moscow for the members of the British Mission. All members are to return to Kashgar. They have one week to leave.'

'I protest most strongly,' said Robbins before Edrich could say exactly the same thing.

'Your protest is noted Sir Walter and I reject it. You may be spies or the advance guard of an invasion force. As such I could have you shot. The support people you brought with you, with whom we have no quarrel, must also go home because we are short of food. So unless you, Mr Compton, have anything else to ask me I suggest that the others return to their hotel and start to organise their departure.' Plasov raised his eyes questioningly at Compton who shook his head whereupon the three allies stood and with a cursory nod at Plasov that he did not return, they left.

Chapter 60

'What does General Muncerville think he is playing at? I have asked him twice. Now I want action.'

Barber handed Statham Muncerville's telegram refusing to return Fernee. When Statham had finished reading it he looked up and pulled a face. Barber leaned over his desk and snatched the telegram out of Statham's hand.

'The confounded cheek of the man, I will not have it Statham. Am I clear?' Barber glared at the colonel.

Statham looked suitably admonished. Though he had absolutely nothing to do with any of this he felt it expedient to hang his head. 'Yes, general.'

'I have written a complaint about the general and I want it enciphered and transmitted to India immediately and if possible even quicker.'

'Not General Dexter in Baghdad as you said the other day?'

'India is my chain of command not Mesopotamia, Statham. General Harris won't let Muncerville ride roughshod over me. I have had the pleasure of serving under General Harris before and he has, I know, a good opinion of me. Why else would he have appointed me for such an important role?'

'Of course he has.'

Barber barked. 'That was a rhetorical question. I do things by the book, Statham. I always have and always will. General Dexter's role is fighting the Turks, not sorting out junior officers like Brigadier Muncerville. India will solve this—I'll have Fernee back you mark my words.' He thrust the telegram at the colonel who took it and slipped quietly away.

Chapter 61

When Robbins and Edrich returned to the hotel after their meeting with Plasov Hutton, feeling better, joined them in the discussion arising from the Commissar's order to them to leave.

'He actually mentioned the word spy? That's serious,' said Hutton.

'I agree but it was the tone of his voice when he said it that shook me,' replied Robbins. 'I do not think that we can do other than obey his order.' Robbins rubbed his chin, 'if we have invaded Turkestan then why haven't we been arrested as spies? I am sure if he had a prisoner he would have produced one by now as it has been several days since the alleged action took place.'

'They might have shot him already,' commented Hutton.

Edrich looked at Hutton and realised that the man might have said something sensible. 'Yes,' he said slowly, 'which means that we are in danger.'

'What are you thinking colonel?'

'What I am thinking, Sir Walter is we gather as much information as we can and get it out to India. I think I will try somehow to stay on because if we have

invaded Turkestan then having an officer here means that he may be able to relay information to them.'

Hutton looked at Edrich in astonishment. 'That will be so dangerous. How could you stay on as we have all been ordered out? They'll throw you into prison. Even if you somehow avoided that, how would you get information out to India—look at the trouble you had sending one measly telegram to India.'

The bed rest was obviously improving Hutton's thought processes Edrich mused to himself. He nodded, 'Yes, it will be dangerous. What I might do is suggest to Plasov that I stay here because—where's the best place to murder someone?' Neither of the others responded, 'out on the trail. I could wait here till you reach Kashgar and telegraphed to say you have arrived safe and well. As for transmitting information to India—that bridge I will cross when I get there.'

'The captain is obviously right about the danger. How or why do you think Plasov will accept it?' Robbins looked as he felt—concerned.

'I think, and hope, the Bolos see America, by being a Republic, as something on whose side they must stay. Because Compton is here and we are working together that might make, even this bunch of cut-throats think twice about shooting me. If there is just me here maybe they will see one person as less of a threat than three. The idea of offering me as a hostage for your safe conduct back to Kashgar may convince Plasov that our intentions are.' Edrich searched for the right word.

'Believable,' suggested Hutton.

The others laughed. 'I doubt Plasov is that stupid,' snorted Edrich. 'Anyway there are enough people here who are anti-Bolshevik who need someone with military experience to deal with - me. I'll know more this afternoon, when I've met my contact, what is required. Compton is not a military man so we must not directly involve him on military matters.' Hutton opened his mouth to speak but Edrich shook his head and went on, 'if we have invaded Turkestan and we are fighting these Bolos then anybody who is opposing them ipso de facto is our friend. I can't let these Bolo opponents down because I've already told them Britain will help, in fact my orders from India told me I must support such people. If we do not keep to our word it damages our prestige and I cannot disobey my orders.'

Edrich rubbed his forefinger and thumb together to indicate money before he said; 'we have all been on the Northwest frontier so we know how guerrilla warfare works and how to combat it with money. In India we are not the guerrillas, here we will be.'

'What would you do?' Robbins was all ears.

'Our experiences on the Khyber Pass helps us to understand not just what moves a guerrilla makes but what counter-moves work against them. Knowing both move and counter-move the Bolos would be likely to make gives us an advantage.'

'Not quite so mountainous here as in the Khyber Pass which is to our disadvantage and the Sarts are not in the fighting class of the Pathans.'

'That is true Sir Walter but maybe we can change that.' Edrich looked at his watch, 'we must be going, Sir Walter. Hutton, will you break the news to our chaps about returning to Kashgar?'

Edrich filled his haversack with his painting gear and accompanied by Robbins he set off for the rendezvous. Once Edrich had arrived at the designated spot it took him half an hour or so to select his subject and the best angle to paint it. Bedi had brought stools from the hotel for Edrich, Robbins and himself to sit on. The three men sat.

'Are you sure that this is a good idea to meet someone in such an exposed position and then talk to them with that lot watching?' Robbins said turning round to see where his and Edrich's police tails were. The six policemen stood yards apart from each other in pairs; each pair was probably about thirty to forty yards from the sitters; Robbins assumed each pair was from the same police-force because they talked to one another.

'It is called "Hiding in plain sight." Our shadowers are not close enough to eavesdrop if we keep our voices down.'

As always Edrich made a sketch in pencil before with his pad on his knees. When he started to paint passers-by began to stop and look over his shoulder at what he was doing. Sometimes the people asked questions to which Robbins, who was trying to read a book, replied on Edrich's behalf and sometimes the passers-by said nothing merely glanced at the paper and then at the scene being painted before moving on. The first two people who stopped to look at Edrich's work caused a kerfuffle. The two young men had a heated argument with one pair and then another pair of the police trackers observing the British. After that everyone who stopped to look at Edrich's work was questioned by one or more of the tracking pairs who sometimes argued amongst themselves. So many people began to look at the paintings that the police could not cope with questioning everyone so they began to only question men who seemed of fighting age or were not European.

It was when the police seemed most inundated that a squat European in his late fifties or early sixties, on crutches and wearing an eye-patch came and stood close to Edrich. 'I am General Abenkov,' the European whispered.

'I am Colonel Edrich and that is Sir Walter Robbins,' Edrich indicated his companion with his head. Robbins did not look up as he quietly turned a book page.

'My companions will keep the police occupied. I think that second window from the right is slightly larger than you have it, colonel. I like oils myself and collect them when I can. Watercolours like you are using,' Abenkov announced loudly saturating the air with garlic, 'I've never been very keen on them.'

'I like oils but I could not bring them with me they are too awkward. I like painting soldiers myself lots of soldiers. Do you like paintings of soldiers?' Edrich said looking at his painting then dabbing at it.

'Yes, I love paintings of soldiers perhaps you could paint such a picture.'

'How many soldiers would you want the painting to contain?'

'Impossible to say, but my army would have various Sart tribesmen and some Europeans. It would have some demobbed officers and others who have no military experience. Abenkov raised his voice, 'that door is too small.'

Edrich looked at the Russian and snarled. 'And you are Renoir, are you? How dare you comment on my painting?' He turned away. 'I couldn't paint such a picture unless I know how many soldiers?'

Abenkov leaned forward studying the painting in detail, shook his head and whispered, 'that is impossible to say because there are so many spies here that each leader in my army only knows the numbers of his own troops in his own band.' He stood back and looked at Edrich's subject. 'This is now a free country thanks to the Bolsheviks and their partners.'

'Roughly how many?'

'Ten thousand Europeans and roughly the same number of tribesmen. That is a lot more than these Bolos can command.'

'What about the Germans and Austrians in the Bolo ranks?' Edrich dabbed paint on the picture.

'The Germans I grant you are good soldiers but there are only a few hundred of them. As for the Austrians, they are poor soldiers so we have nothing to fear from them. As an experienced commander I feel that my experience and background is far superior to anything these scallywags have. That is a lot better using paint to cover up your mistakes.'

'Which front did you fight on,' murmured Robbins. A question that made Edrich wince as he had forgotten to tell Robbins the man's lack of recent experience.

'I was a garrison commander at Merv and its district. I had Cossacks and European soldiers under my command,' Abenkov grunted at Robbins.

'No fighting experience?' Robbins persisted.

'Of course, I fought tribesmen when I was younger. You can't have all your best officers away at the front. You need more colour there,' the general pointed at the painting. 'I didn't get my promotions like some in the Imperial Army through favouritism or patronage. I was always promoted on merit.'

'Very pleased to hear it,' said Edrich mixing blue and yellow paint gradually to get the green he wanted for one of the trees' leaves. 'So what if anything can we do?'

'Are the British going to invade? We hear so many rumours as to where they are: along the borders of China: our boundaries with Persia; on the approach roads from Afghanistan.'

'No, we are not going to ever invade Russia.'

'You are going to let these Bolos maintain control?' Abenkov looked as he sounded amazed and angry at the same time. 'You imperialists should listen to us when we make constructive criticism of your work.' He dropped his voice, 'if Britain was to invade then the whole of Russia would welcome you with open arms as saviours.'

'Possibly, general, but our help will not be by providing troops but in other ways.'

'Well, we do need money. We need it to buy arms and we must pay the troops.'

'How much money do you think you need?'

'What are you doing? Why are you talking to this man for so long?' One of the police watchers had seen what was going on and had marched over to Edrich's side.

'This revolutionary gentleman was discussing my painting. He didn't like one of the windows or the colours. He then asked for alms.'

The policeman turned to Abenkov and snarled, 'how much did you ask for?'

'Half a million roubles at least as I need to buy clothes because I cannot abide scruffiness like all these POWs about the place. If you look smart you think smart I have no doubt on that score. I need to buy something heavy for the winter. I thought half a million sounded reasonable.'

The policeman started to laugh, 'hey comrades this old man has asked for half a million roubles from a bloke whose painting he doesn't like.' The policeman wandered back to join his friends leaving Abenkov still standing by Edrich. 'Tell him you don't like something else and ask for more money,' the policeman shouted to hoots of laughter.

'You mentioned the word "Heavy" - meaning you need artillery?' The Russian's grunt Robbins took to be an affirmative, 'so where would you get that?' Robbins stimulated by a look from Edrich, which involved the raising of eyebrows and the pursing of lips.

'China, maybe Afghanistan—anywhere which has some to spare.'

'How would you get it here? Do you have access to motor cars, camels or horses?'

'Horses and camels through our Sart tribesmen, but cars we have none. Sarts don't know much about engines. I still think your colour is wrong there.' Abenkov pointed at the painting, 'that is not how it looks.'

'You are talking too much to this man, be off with you,' a different one of Edrich's policeman trailers grunted thrusting his face into Abenkov's.

'Comrade, this is a typical bourgeoisie piece of work by an Imperialist. I was pointing this out to this man—who is hardly an artist to me—the error of his ways.'

The policeman studied Edrich's painting and nodded, 'I see what you mean, Comrade. Don't be long.'

'You need to use bold colours not follow the wishy washy standards of your ilk,' Abrakov said speaking and waving his arms.

'What about your Europeans knowing about engines?' Edrich spoke out of the side of his mouth.

'Engines are not the concern of officers—the work is too dirty. How can you be smart and dirty at the same time? The answer is you cannot. No, engines are for the lower classes, officering is for the upper classes. Failure to note this last fact will be the reason these Bolos will ultimately fail.'

'What about your soldiers fighting experience?'

'All those with military experience will now have to fight as rankers. Damn shame, still they know their duty to the motherland. I'm not sure the picture is in proportion. I know how to rectify it,' Abenkov picked up brush and pretended to paint.

'Do you have a Sart leader? That won't work. I thought I was the artist here.' Edrich turned round and waved his hands in the direction of the police groups

and then tapped his finger against his forehead. He then roughly sized the paintbrush from Abenkov's hand.

'I deal with a Kirghiz chieftain called Akbar. Not you would say a very inspiring fellow. I think the man is more concerned with obtaining independence from Russia than with ensuring these Bolos are overthrown. Akbar has no military experience whatsoever. Still beggars cannot be choosers and the Sarts will make good cannon fodder if nothing else. Anyway I have to go. We must meet again. I will instruct Sokolovsky to arrange it when you have some money for us. For an amateur that is a good drawing.'

'It is a painting,' said Edrich to Abenkov's retreating back. 'I don't need your comments.'

The two Britons watched Abenkov walk past their shadowers, who observed the general with little apparent curiosity and didn't notice that he was using his crutches incorrectly.

Chapter 62

When the two Britons arrived back at the hotel after Edrich's artistic endeavours they found Anders waiting for them with a balding fair-haired man—the Danish Major Bohr, the Red Cross Representative for the Austrians POWs. After the four men had shaken hands the two Red Cross officers followed Edrich to his room where the four men could be alone. After Edrich had again searched the room for listening devices Major Bohr took a piece of paper out of his pocket and gave it to Robbins.

Robbins read the paper carefully twice then with his eyes flicking between the paper and Edrich's stare he said. 'It seems that this is an order from the Bolshevik leaders Lenin and Trotsky that forbids any POW from joining the Bolsheviks. If any have already joined the Bolsheviks then they must be discharged forthwith.' Robbins scanned the paper again. 'This is dated June 30th.' He turned to Bohr, 'may I ask where you got this paper?'

Bohr smiled. 'It appeared one day delivered by hand to the house where we are staying.'

Anders took up the conversation. 'We doubt that the paper is authentic because we believe that it was written by Captain Beckelmann.'

'Why do you believe it's a forgery?'

'The government here are ignoring this paper. If they believed it was from Lenin they would have actioned it immediately.' Bohr took the paper back from Robbins. 'Plasov claimed not to know about this letter when we asked him about it. From the look on his face I think he was lying. Anders and my theory is, that the Bolos know about this paper and they know that it doesn't come from Moscow.' The Swede stood as did Bohr. 'I think it is best we do not stay too long. Our relationship is fraught enough with the government I don't want to jeopardise that by spending too much time with you.'

'We understand that Zwemmer is the senior Austrian officer who has joined the Bolos, what is he like? And who leads the Austrians not in the Bolshevik forces?'

'Zwemmer is actually a German officer who was acting as liaison to the Austrian Army when he was captured. Zwemmer is secretive, elusive and we believe he pulls Sailer's strings. The Bolos are such a nasty lot that we send or have sent the officers home first, so the POWs' natural leaders are gone. Then no one leads the non-Bolshevik Austrians as a single group because there are so many different nationalities within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Each nationality has their own spokesman. I speak only German and English so it is difficult for me to understand exactly what is happening when my POW charges speak everything from Czech, via Hungarian and Polish to Slovak. Now we must go we have stayed too long.'

'Thank you for coming,' Robbins said. After the four men shook hands the Scandinavians left and their footsteps down the hall indicated they were going fast.

Edrich stood by the window and watched the Scandinavians leave the hotel, he turned to Robbins. 'Perhaps at our next meeting with Plasov we can tackle him on why they are ignoring their own government's directive on the POWs not joining the Bolo army.'

Robbins pulled a face and took several seconds to reply. 'It could be an interesting reply if we get one. What we must not do is get our Scandinavian friends into trouble. Plasov will suspect we have learnt about the directive from them. Let us think how we broach the subject to him if indeed we get the chance before we leave. In the meanwhile shall we go and see how Hutton got on in telling our chaps that they are going home?'

As Robbins and Edrich ascended the stairs to Hutton's room an Asian was being escorted down the stairs by one of the British party's Indian servants.

'The man on the stairs was visiting you Hutton?' Robbins asked as he sat down.

'Yes, he claimed to be a physician from Kabul and that his name is Aziz-up-Din. He wanted our help so he could return to Afghanistan.'

'Why? We have nothing to do with the Afghans.' Edrich sounded suspicious.

'That is what I told him, colonel. He said with Britain having control of Afghanistan's Foreign Policy we had a responsibility to help him. I disabused him of that idea. Then he claimed that with so many bandits roaming the surrounding areas that he was sure that he would be robbed. I said that was a Tashkent Government issue not ours.' Hutton stopped because of the sound of many boots could be heard approaching rapidly. The door burst open to admit the six policemen, one of whom Edrich recognised from their previous visit. Commands were screamed by a short roly-poly man sporting a leather cap and two policemen escorted Robbins and Edrich to their rooms. When the pair reached their rooms they found police already busy making a great mess in each.

For the next hour Edrich watched the policemen go through everything he had. His clothes were removed from his luggage and each article was searched, much to Edrich's disgust, by dirty hands and fingernails. What angered him

more was when one brute began to open his books, shake them to see if anything came out, that done he just dropped them to the ground. When the thug picked up a third book Edrich seized it from him. Edrich held it carefully before he fanned the pages so the thug and 'leather cap' could see there was nothing between the sheets before he placed the book gently on the bed. Edrich performed the same scene with the other three books he had brought with him; he loved his books. The thug then took great pleasure in roughly frisking Edrich; the man's stench nearly made Edrich sick but somehow he held onto the contents of his stomach. Finally when the room was in complete disarray 'leather cap' snarled a command and the men clumped out of the room. What sounded like the same command was shouted out in the hall to be followed by the clatter on boots descending the stairs.

'Did they take anything?' Edrich asked both of his compatriots when they joined him in his room. Both men shook their heads.

'When I looked out of the window the Afghan doctor was talking to some of the police,' volunteered Hutton.

'Agent provocateur?' asked Robbins looking at the other two men.

'You talked to him Hutton. What do you think?'

Hutton thought for a moment before speaking. 'He seemed genuine but it just sounded like he was smuggling money out of the country. It seems odd we should be raided just after he left.'

'You did not commit us to anything, Hutton?' Robbins asked more abruptly than he intended.

'Absolutely not Sir Walter.'

'Compton told us that we would get more than one visit from these policemen and he was right.' Edrich paused to let his anger subside then quietly, 'did you tell the rest of our party the news about returning to Kashgar?'

'I did, and they seemed to accept the news cheerfully.'

'Excellent at least they won't have to be tidying our rooms continuously. I think I need to send a telegram to India informing them what is going on,' Robbins said as he stood.

There was a knock at the door and Bedi entered with a note that he handed to Edrich. Edrich scanned the note quickly and smiled before dismissing the Indian saying there was no reply.

'Gentlemen, it seems that the cinema has a good film called 'The Prisoner of Zenda.' Compton has seen it twice and recommends it. Perhaps after this unpleasantness that is what we should do.'

At breakfast the following day the British mission were in the midst of discussing how much they had all enjoyed the previous evening's film when the hotel manager marched up to Edrich and handed him a note in a peremptory fashion. Edrich took it and stared at the man till the latter turned on his heel and stalked out of the restaurant.

'He is very rude,' said Robbins before asking Edrich as he was reading the note. 'Is it important?'

Without a word Edrich finished his reading then handed the note to Robbins but before he could read it Edrich spoke to his companions.

'It seems we have been summoned to see the head man here—Bogdanovich. Good God here is Compton.'

'Good morning, Consul,' Robbins, Hutton and Edrich said together.

'Have you heard from Bogdanovich? He has summoned me to see him at 10.am.'

'Yes we have. I have just received word that the three of us are to attend at the same time as you. Any idea what it is about?'

'No and whatever the reason is I don't like it. I have only met the man twice. It seems that he likes to leave Foreign affairs in the hands of Plasov that way if anything goes wrong Bogdanovich can blame him.'

'What's he like Mr Compton?' Hutton said sipping his tea.

'Piotr Bogdanovich? When the Sarts tried to overthrow the Tashkent Soviet in December 1917 they killed the then Bolshevik leaders. Bogdanovich led the counter-revolution, which resulted in the massacre of thousands of Sarts, and then he became the local Bolshevik leader. He is a drunken, bad tempered Russian ex-railway worker who is barely literate and resents anyone whom he considers educated. He is a good decision-maker where murder is concerned, often performing the killing himself. For all other decisions he depends on Moscow to tell him exactly what to do. He is a near relative of the Police Chief Chevosky, not in the blood sense, but in character and unpleasantness.'

'Well gentlemen let us see what the man has to say shall we. I suggest we meet in the hotel lobby in quarter of an hour. Mr Compton, will you have tea while we are getting ready.'

Edrich did not have to summon a waiter because as if by magic one appeared with a cup and then another with a samovar. Compton looked at Edrich with raised eyebrows.

Chapter 63

The White House the official residence of the Turkestan Republic was an imposing stone building that had been the former residence of the Governor-Generals of the Imperial Government. The building inside was imposing but as the four men climbed the stairs they noticed the walls were marked with what appeared to be dried blood and human hair; occasionally bullet holes could be seen.

When the Britons and the American entered the Government Leader's office they saw the man Compton had accurately described as Bogdanovich, sitting in a huge wooden chair at his desk; a desk empty of papers. Bogdanovich did not get up merely thrust a finger at the four newcomers to sit in a row of chairs opposite him. The four men sat in silence as if sensing that a very unpleasant interview with a school headmaster awaited them. The sun streamed through the office windows so that when the Anglo-American party all sat down they had to squint to see Bogdanovich. Plasov sat discreetly to the left of his leader

while the man who sat on Bogdanovich's right was secret police chief Chevovsky. Plasov nodded a surreptitious greeting, Chevovsky merely scowled.

Bogdanovich stared at the four allies before he summoned Plasov to him with a jerk of his head. Plasov crept demurely to Bogdanovich's side and began to whisper in his ear. Suddenly Bogdanovich screamed and Plasov took a step backwards and spoke in a louder voice; Plasov was obviously identifying each member of the Anglo-American party by name. Bogdanovich ended Plasov's conversation the same way as he had started it with a jerk of his head. Plasov crept back to his chair. Bogdanovich stood and Edrich noted that the man had a long body and very short stubby legs encased in gleaming leather boots; Edrich also noted that the man had both a revolver and a bayonet attached to the belt he wore round his trousers.

Bogdanovich moved slowly round to the front of the desk and perched on it with neither leg quite reaching the floor. As if by magic another man appeared from behind the desk where he had been sitting on the floor; this second man had a face that was bathed in sweat. When Bogdanovich began to talk the second man standing on Bogdanovich's left, began to translate.

'I have here a document from Moscow,' Bogdanovich snapped his fingers behind him and held his hand out to receive something, nobody moved. Bogdanovich snapped his fingers again before turning round and glaring at Plasov. The interpreter moved towards the desk but stopped abruptly when shouted at. A cowed looking Plasov moved forward, opened the desk drawer, extracted a sheet of paper and leaned forward with it in his hand. Bogdanovich who had turned back to face the Britons and American clicked his fingers. Plasov nervously placed the paper in Bogdanovich's hand. Bogdanovich looked cursorily at the paper then stared at the group before him. Edrich nearly smiled because the whole thing seemed theatrical.

'It seems that there has been another invasion of Russia,' Bogdanovich paused and waved the paper, 'can you explain it?'

Silence hung in the air like as Bogdanovich waited for someone to speak. Edrich exchanged glances with Compton whose look said, "The British Empire at it again."

Edrich took a deep breath. 'Comrade Commissar we have been discussing with Commissar Plasov about the alleged invasion by British troops of Turkestan. I can only tell you what I told Commissar Plasov. We know nothing about the earlier invasion or anything about this one. We are surprised that the British Government would contemplate doing such a thing or, how or, why we would invade Russia twice.'

Edrich waited for an explosion that did not come. Bogdanovich crossed his arms and looked not at Edrich but at Compton to whom he spoke. 'We are surprised that a President such as Hickson is supporting the invasion of Russia by troops of the Imperial Powers.'

'Knowing our President's policy I am sure he would have objected to any invasion by the British or indeed the French. But, they are our allies,' replied Compton whose surprise registered clearly in his face, 'so we have to support them but I am sure in words only and not with soldiers.' Compton shook his head.

Bogdanovich smiled. 'Really Mr Compton perhaps you are too junior to be kept abreast of events. American troops are reported to be with the Imperialists.'

Compton gave a wry smile. 'I am surprised at that. We speak English so it is possible that your sources somehow confused British soldiers for American ones. There are no American soldiers in India or Persia so they cannot have been part of the invasion force. Colonel Edrich and Sir Walter Robbins will support me on this.'

'Mr Compton's statement is completely accurate - there are no American soldiers in either India or Persia,' Robbins espoused hammering his right forefinger on the arm rest of his chair.

Edrich who had been thinking about what Bogdanovich had said now spoke. 'Commissar you said Imperial troops. Are you saying French troops are also involved?'

'Yes.'

'I am extremely puzzled by your statement. I have no knowledge of any French troops in the area of South Russia or over the border in Persia and certainly not in India where we fought them for years for control of the country. Whilst France is our ally we have different interests which both countries adhere to.' That was a lie because the two countries were always at loggerheads over something.

Edrich made a show of focusing his look on Plasov deeming it time to change the subject. 'I have told Commissar Plasov that we have not heard from our government since we arrived here'

'Nor I from mine,' added Compton.

Chevosky said something at which Bogdanovich nodded and spoke to Edrich. 'Commissar Chevosky reminds me that that is not true. You sent a telegram to India the other day.'

'We did, but I have not yet had a reply.'

Bogdanovich said nothing just turned, got up and walked over to Plasov to be joined by Chevosky. For a few moments the three Russians talked quietly. None of the Anglo-American party spoke to each other being too busy watching the Russians. Eventually Bogdanovich returned to his chair and sat down heavily before putting his elbows on the desk and addressing the men in front of him.

'The invasion I am talking about has occurred in North Russia round the port of Archangel.'

The sound of a horse neighing in the distance indicated how quiet the room had become after the last statement. Edrich stole a look at Compton and Robbins who both looked as flummoxed as he felt.

'I could have all of you shot as spies and that includes you Mr Compton because American troops are very much part of this invasion. So what have you to say?'

Again silence filled the air. Edrich noticed Plasov lean forward and Chevosky pat his pistol holster with a grin.

Eventually Robbins broke the silence. He spoke with a firmness which Edrich and Compton approved. 'Commissar, a spy is someone who comes to a

place in secret to collect information and transmit it secretly. We have come to see you openly and you have a copy of our one transmission by telegram to India. We have also very specific questions about certain things that whilst we are here today we would like to discuss with you.'

'You have been talking to Commissar Plasov have you not? He represents the Tashkent Soviet's views on all subjects so I am dumbfounded by your request for the same information.'

'It is always nice to clarify things with the head of the government,' Compton said keeping his eyes on Plasov whose face remained set but whose eyes flickered.

A ghost of a smile flicked across Bogdanovich's face for an instant. 'I am not the leader I merely chair the meetings of all the Commissars. I may also remind you that Moscow is the seat of our government and it is they who provide me with direction and guidance. What would you want to ask me?'

'The POWs,' said Edrich.

Bogdanovich turned to Plasov who shrugged and held his hands out palms upward. Bogdanovich turned back to Edrich. 'We want them in our Red Army but we do not force them to join. Those that join will, after all the counter revolutionaries are defeated in Russia, go home to spread the revolution.'

'I thought Moscow ordered that the POWs were to be sent home and were not allowed to join the Red Army,' Robbins said.

Bogdanovich's eyes narrowed, he turned to stare at Plasov who shrank into his seat. He turned back. 'From where did you get that information?'

'Not from Commissar Plasov I assure you. I think it was from amongst the German prisoners, or the Austrians, or the Serbs, or the,' Edrich proclaimed.

'Very funny,' barked Bogdanovich.

Compton added, 'I think it possibly came from Sailer,' mentioning Sailer as the source might get him into trouble.

'Yes, I am sure that we had heard that he had passed it on to his men,' Robbins bobbing his head vigorously in support of his colleagues.

'So you are spying on Sailer?'

'No, but we do keep our ears open. Sailer is of no interest. Our interest is the Imperialist Beckelmann because he wants to resume fighting us.' Robbins' use of the word "Imperialist" made his companions want to laugh but a glance at the sour look on Bogdanovich's face checked them.

'I hope he does so. Imperialists fighting one another will surely ease the arrival of freedom for the masses everywhere. Enough of talking about Imperialists relationships, you have asked Commissar Plasov about the cotton and whether either Britain or America might buy it.' The Anglo-Americans all nodded as one. 'I am afraid until this Archangel invasion is satisfactorily cleared up neither of your two countries will be allowed to buy it.'

'What about the Indian Traders, subjects of the British crown, who complain that your officials are confiscating their money and their goods.'

'Do you have their names?'

'No,' Robbins responded.

'If they made their money here they should keep it here. Why anyway should they receive different treatment from Russians?' Bogdanovich folded his arms.

'Well they are British subjects.'

'Subject is the right word. We seek to free all colonized peoples and in the interim if they have traded here they must submit to our laws. Is there anything else?'

'Yes,' said Robbins. 'I am retiring from my post in Kashgar, as you may know. I wanted to travel home via Moscow can I do that?'

Bogdanovich laughed as he shook his head, 'Sir Walter Robbins we have received orders from Moscow that you all must return to Kashgar—we could or will shoot you if you disobey that order. We gave you a week but I suggest that you leave sooner before Moscow changes its mind. You may, if you wish, not travel back together,' his eyes narrowed, 'there are many bandits between here and the border. In this case safety may not be in numbers but by being in different caravans.'

Bogdanovich stood up and said that Plasov wanted to talk to them. Then without a backward glance and with Chevosky by his side the Turkestan leader left the room without a goodbye.

Once the two Commissars were gone Plasov pointed out that Bogdanovich had deliberately not mentioned the issue about the British troops in southern Turkestan fighting against the legitimate Russian government because Plasov had already mentioned it at their previous meeting. Again Robbins and Edrich denied all knowledge of the invasion and that they had received no reply to the telegram they had sent to India about this matter. They suggested that another telegram be sent. Plasov was non-committal about sending another telegram claiming it was a committee decision to allow such a thing. For the next half an hour Plasov and the Anglo-Americans talked about all the subjects they had raised at previous meetings and as before it was fruitless.

As the Anglo-American mission left the White House Chevosky was waiting by a horse drawn cart in which were a number of rough timber coffins. As soon as Chevosky saw them he shouted a command and two men appeared from the far side of the wagon and clambered aboard. The two men struggled with one of the coffins and lifted up one of the ends. Chevosky screamed at the men again and they opened the flimsy lid and showed the coffin's contents to the four men.

'Good God,' cried Compton, 'who is that?'

'It is Dr Aziz-ul-Din, the Afghani who came to see me yesterday. We thought he was a Bolshevik agent,' Hutton sounded shocked.

Compton whirled round to look at Edrich whose face was set in anger as he glared at Chevosky and shouted in English, 'you bastard Chevosky!'

For a moment the Russian's face hardened and then it suddenly broke into a broad grin. Edrich watched in horror as the policeman reached into the coffin pulled the corpse up by the shirt and pointed at two bloody bullet holes in its chest; dropping the corpse Chevosky pointed his fingers at Edrich and pulled an imaginary trigger. Chevosky turned away and barked an order. The two men who had opened the coffin now nailed it shut before they assumed their seats in the wagon, which then lumbered slowly down the street. Chevosky stood oozing unpleasantness as the Anglo-American group passed him by without any further exchange of words.

Chapter 64

To: General Harris—Headquarters Indian Army Simla

From: General Barber—Meshed

Captain Fernee on my orders went to liaise with General Muncerville so that I can tie in the latter's role with mine. I did not second Captain Fernee to General Muncerville. On two occasions I have requested that Captain Fernee be returned to my command. On each occasion General Muncerville has refused to let Captain Fernee return.

Captain Fernee has skills that I need to ensure that I meet the objectives that you set me. I believe that it is not in General Muncerforce remit to hijack staff on a whim and refuse to return them when requested to do so.

Would General Harries send a telegram to Baku directly and order General Muncerville to return Captain Fernee to my command?

'He is right, sir, General Muncerville cannot do this,' Routledge waved the telegram, before handing it back to Harris who glanced at it then dropped it on his desk with a sigh.

'I agree, Reg, send a telegram ordering that Fernee be returned to Barber's command. We earmarked the good captain for Meshed and we will not be coerced by what appears to be a fait accompli. Do it as soon as possible there's a good fellow. One wonders at times if people know there is a war on.'

Madam Volkov was a woman that Washbrook estimated, as she shyly entered his office, to be in her middle thirties. By the appearance of the woman's clothes and the loose skin on her neck and face she had obviously lost weight recently—very recently. Washbrook thought her pretty with her fair hair and tired blue eyes. Washbrook moved to the woman and after he had briefly touched her hand he arranged a chair so that she sat beside him at his desk rather than facing him in a confrontational manner across it. Washbrook smiled as warmly as he could whilst her smile was wan.

'Ambassador Bolotnikov has told me about the travails you suffered on your journey here. I gather that you were robbed of all your valuables?'

'Yes. Some of them were presents from my husband, others were heirlooms,' she hung her head and studied her lap.

'They could have killed you,' muttered Washbrook with all the sympathy that his aching loins could muster.

'Yes, like my husband Leonid. I was not able to see him when he was in prison. I went every day for four days. Then on the fifth day I went and the guards just laughed and said he was no longer in prison. They had shot him that morning.'

Volkov's eyes began to turn red as she began to weep. Washbrook leaned across the table and clucked sympathetically as he handed her his handkerchief. Volkov wiped her eyes and then blew her nose on the handkerchief before handing it back to Washbrook. Washbrook held the handkerchief between thumb and forefinger as he gingerly returned it to his pocket.

'Madam Volkov how do you know they shot him? From what I understand these Bolos or Bolsheviks are terrible people and have a particularly nasty sense of humour about such matters.'

'No, I know he is dead. A reliable person, whose husband was also shot, saw Leonid's body. People go into prison and they don't come out.'

'Why would they shoot him?'

Volkov looked at Washbrook as if he did not have all his brains available. 'These people do not have to have a reason. When the Bolsheviks seized power they opened the gaols and let murders not merely go but actually took them into their ranks as soldiers or policemen. These people actually enjoy murder Major Washbrook,' she paused and added with resignation, 'I have to say though that my husband's job may have had something to do with it. He was one of the managers of the railway and many of the new members of the government were the lowly riff-raff working many levels beneath him—these new government Bolshevik people take pleasure in killing their old superiors. Revenge killings they call them – revenge for what? Superior breeding? Having more brains? Prepared to get an education and work hard?' She snapped, 'why are you writing things down?'

'I like to make notes it aids my memory about anyone coming out of Russia. Do you have any children?' He added looking down at his notes.

'No, my, our, daughter died of typhus several years ago.'

Good no encumbrances thought Washbrook. 'I assume that Ambassador Bolotnikov told you that I am the British Consul here acting on behalf of the Government of India. I gather that you wish to go to the United States and that you would like to leave via India is that correct?'

'Yes to both those questions.'

'Was all your money and any other valuables stolen by those awful Bolos? In order to grant you permission to go through India I have to charge you a fee.'

'I have no money.'

'You have family in the United States could they send you money?'

'I don't think so.'

Theatrically Washbrook leaned back in his chair and rubbed his chin. 'Our government is very strict on what passports I grant and they insist that any passport issued by me must be paid for by the person to whom it applies.'

'I have no money. The Bolotnikovs said I can stay with them temporarily but then I think they will go to China.'

'Well I doubt these Bolsheviks will last long then there will be a new government and you can go home.'

'But what will I do in the meantime?'

'Well I am sure something will turn up here. If I may be so bold your presence here in Kashgar will lighten the town considerably for an old bachelor'

like me. Perhaps you will come to dinner one evening?’ Washbrook saw the look in the woman’s eye. ‘I would of course invite the Bolotnikovs if they were still here or any other Europeans available. As for the passport let me think of whether there are any ways round government regulations and that will take time. I have to be sure you are not a spy.’

‘I am not a spy, honestly!’

‘Of course not otherwise I would have to hand you over to the Chinese and they don’t like spies.’

The woman smiled a thank you at Washbrook and when she left a few minutes later Washbrook spent half an hour trying to work out whether the woman either found him attractive or had guessed his ulterior motives about her.

If Washbrook had treated Volkov warmly the same could not be said of his meeting with Lal. Washbrook took an instant dislike to the man’s face because the man’s nose was thick with hairs; hairs that curled out of the both nostrils like dark thin fishhooks yet despite that, he could not keep his eyes off them.

‘Major, I must return to Delhi and my family. I have been away so long and my father is dying.’

‘Mr Lal when did you and how did you, hear that he was dying?’

‘I had a letter in Tashkent six weeks ago.’

‘How did it get to you?’

‘A member of my family brought it with him from India.’

‘Who was he? I will check to see when he left Kashgar from our records. We keep records of all caravans that leave here—his name?’

‘I am most sorry to say, Major Washbrook, Gundappa Lal did not leave from here because he went via Persia where he had some business.’

‘Where exactly was Mr Lal in Persia.’

‘Meshed, I think.’

‘We have consuls in Meshed I can check with them. We do this to prevent German or Bolshevik agents sneaking across into India.’

The Indian ran his tongue round his lips. That’s an obvious sign of the man’s nervousness thought Washbrook. ‘But he was going into Russia.’

‘Is he still in Turkestan?’

‘He was going onto Ashkhabad and then back to Persia unless these Bolsheviks killed him. They kill lots of people all the time and for no reason. The Indian government should stop them.’

Washbrook decided to ignore the comment about the government. ‘You have seen people being killed, Mr Lal?’

‘Oh I have seen bodies in the street and my friends tell me that people disappear all the time and they are never seen again. These Bolsheviks freed criminals. Why will the British not do something?’

Washbrook pondered a moment, ‘we look after our subjects but in a foreign land where there is a revolution that is difficult Lal. Now, how long ago was the letter about your father written?’

Washbrook could see the Indian thinking ‘I am not sure, major. Is it important?’

‘Yes, if your father was dying he could well have died by now as the letter was written weeks ago. I wondered why you are returning now.’

The Indian seemed puzzled. ‘Yes he might,’ said the Indian sadly, ‘still I must return home to the family. I came as soon as I could. The Bolsheviks control travel, you know, from Tashkent—one just cannot just up and leave.’

Washbrook nodded and changed tack. ‘What sort of business are you in Mr Lal and are you taking money back into India? If so I must know how much.’

Lal looked at Washbrook intently. ‘What are you suggesting, Major Washbrook?’

‘I am not suggesting anything, Mr Lal. My purpose here is to look after the interests of His Majesty, King George V and his subjects—that includes people like you.’

‘Indian subjects you mean?’ interrupted Lal.

‘Naturally, but others also,’ Washbrook snapped. ‘I must know all that I can about you so that I can smooth the way for you with the Chinese authorities here, to ease your return to India. The Chinese are very worried about people who cross the border and could be bringing such things as weapons or inflammatory books or newspapers.’

Lal snorted in disbelief. ‘Major, those Bolsheviks went through our bags and removed as much as they could that took their fancy. I talked to them and said I was taking goods back to my ill father and my family.’ He paused and went on bitterly, ‘it made no difference they took everything including some of my money.’

‘Why only some when other people lost all?’

Lal smiled wearily. ‘Did they, or have they claimed they lost all? There is a difference. To use an English expression, “You do not put all your eggs in one pocket”.

Washbrook went to correct him and say the expression uses the word basket not pocket but then could not be bothered. ‘So how much money are we discussing?’

‘I have a few thousand rupees and some Russian money. You will change the latter?’ Lal’s eyes opened wide pleadingly.

Washbrook sat back and thought for a moment. If the man was an agent would they have given him only Indian money? He decided that they would have done. He would send information ahead to India to see if the authorities knew the man. ‘I may be able to exchange some of your money but the rate now for roubles is very bad. I will only take certain roubles I won’t take those Tashkent printed notes only Imperial notes. There is a man in town called Chandarasaker he might help you change your money into Chinese currency.’

The Indian looked at Washbrook with a passive face but his voice betrayed his sadness. ‘Thank you, major.’

‘Before I change any money for you, or issue you a travel document, I will need to have your address and your father’s address.’ Washbrook picked up a pen and put it on a sheet of paper and then slid the two objects across to Lal. Inwardly Washbrook smiled because he was going to make some money on the exchange directly or through Chandarasaker.

Chapter 65

Edrich sat back and looked at his sketch of the street scene he could see from his window. He was drawing a cart and its harnessed horses being unloaded. The horses were wrong, it was their legs—no it was the proportion of leg to body which was wrong. Why couldn't he get horses right he asked himself because I've: sat on them; driven them; shod them—well once anyway he had helped the ferrier in the village when he was very little. No, he decided I can do everything but draw them, he erased part of the fetlock of one of the two horses in his sketch then drew some lines, shook his head, erased what he had just drawn plus more of the fetlock. He thought he heard a gentle wrapping upon his door then it became harder and louder. Edrich put down his pencil and his pad onto the table beside him and turning towards the door invited whoever was knocking to come in.

Robbins entered the room looking over his shoulder as he ushered in a man, not a Sart, definitely European. Edrich decided the newcomer looked Slavic because the man had high cheekbones, long straight dark hair that was swept back and a drooping moustache of a type that Edrich had never seen in England.

'This is Mr Zukoff, said Robbins, 'he tells me he came from Meshed, works for Colonel Statham and that he has been here in Tashkent for two weeks.' Robbins turned and looked at Zukoff, 'he speaks Russian and Persian. Russian is in my opinion his native language but perhaps we should talk in Persian.' He switched his attention to the Russian and addressed him slowly in Farsi, 'why have you not been to see us before?'

'One thing that these Bolsheviks have adopted from Czarist times is the need for a police force that follows anybody and everybody they suspect of anything. You British fall within that category. I have taken the precaution of watching you and seeing how the Bolos keep tabs on you—usually it is three men. If you walk anywhere all three follow you by walking. When you go anywhere by carriage the spies also hire one. You normally get your carriage from outside the hotel. There is inevitably a second one carriage waiting empty behind the one you have taken, and that makes it easy for them to do their job. However on one occasion a second carriage was not immediately available so one of the watchers confiscated an old man's bicycle and he followed you. So I suggest that if in the future you need to avoid being followed walk to a place where only one carriage is available because if there is no bicycle for them to confiscate—you can lose them.'

Robbins and Edrich smiled at each other before the latter said, 'good advice thank you. Now tell us more and prove to us what you claim.'

'As far as the Bolshevik authorities go I am a Persian merchant. Tonight I stay in this hotel and tomorrow I must return to Meshed and report to Colonel Statham.'

'We have a man along the corridor who spies on anyone who comes to see us.'

Zukoff blushed. 'This hotel allows certain things to occur if the price is right, my last hotel did not. The women I bought are discussing with your corridor spy various options, provided your officer does not make her another offer.'

'Another offer? Women? Hutton?' Robbins looked shocked which made Zukoff smile.

'Don't worry it's all about money. Your officer will not be tempted.'

'Won't the women get into trouble if anyone finds out? The man could identify them,' said Robbins sounding appalled.

'When I left them your concierge's tongue was hanging down to his knees and his eyes were not fixed on anything except one of the women's chest.' Zukoff smiled, 'the other will offer to watch this room.'

'You have a Russian name?' Edrich snapped wanting to get things going sooner rather than later.

'My Russian father started traded in Persia forty years ago which was where I was born to my Persian mother. I lived many years in Russia but my home now, according to my papers, is in Tehran. As a trader I travel throughout Turkestan and Persia.'

Robbins looked across to Edrich who stared at Zukoff. Edrich had met Statham when they had both attended a course to learn Pashtu in 1898. Edrich recalled the man with difficulty and wondered how the years had treated him. 'Describe Colonel Statham for me please.'

'He has a very red face like a tomato, he has many freckles. He is about the same height as you; bald on the top but the rest of his hair is a copper colour. It is hard to guess his age but it will be over forty yet not over fifty. He does not speak Russian we only converse in Farsi.'

The colour hair now Edrich remembered and smiled at the thought that like all redheads Statham skin did not go brown merely pink or red. The man might have seen a photograph of Statham but one could not tell from a photograph what colour a man's hair was. In addition it was rare for a British officer not to have his hat on when a photograph was taken—the Indian or Persia weather saw to that. Zukoff's Persian seemed excellent to Edrich and that for some reason left him undecided over whether he would take the man at his word.

'Perhaps you would like me to take a message to Colonel Statham?'

'Perhaps, it would be very dangerous for you.' Edrich stared into the man's eyes that locked onto his own.

'What do you think?' whispered Robbins in English. 'Genuine? Bogus?'

Edrich held his gaze on Zukoff. 'I believe him. He's suggested that he take a message to Meshed for us and his description of Statham is accurate. If he isn't genuine then he's a good actor. What do you think?'

'Nothing too sensitive,' suggested Robbins.

'I would give him what we think Meshed needs to know. We could write in ink a letter to his wife and write our message using lemon juice as the secret ink.'

Robbins then switched to Russian and asked, 'How would you carry our message?'

'Do what I have done before tuck it into my hat or, my boot. I might possibly sew it into a coat. I've done this before for Colonel Statham.'

'Some people who have been to see us have been shot do you not worry that that may happen to you?'

'Colonel, these Bolsheviks are my enemies, they might kill me whether I take a message from you or not. Hopefully your floor spy is otherwise engaged but I suspect, not for much longer.'

The two Britons went and stood in a corner and discussed what they should do. It was during the conversation that Robbins suggested they ask more questions such as why he was working for the British and whether he had contacted anyone else in Tashkent.

'I am working for the Turkestan Union which seeks help from the British for the overthrow of these Bolsheviks. So I am working with, not for, the British. In order to get that British help I volunteered to find out information on what is happening in Tashkent for your Colonel Statham in Meshed. I have traded with a Persian, Zair Khidar, who told me he carried a message to Meshed recently from Consul Compton.'

'We better check this chap's story with Compton. Meanwhile ask him to return to his room and we will contact him later.'

'How do you get in and out of Russia so easily? You have a Russian name and that I'm sure makes the Bolos suspicious.'

'I wear, as you see Persian, clothes. I have Persian papers and the requisite Russian documentation stating I am Persian. Many people, now in authority, cannot read—certainly not Persian—then I try and speak Farsi and stumble with my Russian when I deal with the authorities.'

The American consul was pleased by Edrich's visit and surprised by his questions about Zukoff. The two men sat in the garden drinking tea as Compton explained that almost as soon as he had arrived in Tashkent he had been contacted by a Persian called Zair Khidar. People in Tashkent, whom Compton trusted, had vouched for Zair. Compton therefore accepted Zair as a friend to an extent that he had entrusted him with a letter for Meshed that contained information on the cotton situation in Tashkent and the suggestion that the British and French send missions to join him in the town. Zukoff had subsequently arrived with a letter from Meshed saying that Statham had forwarded Compton's suggestion to India and asking him for information on the number of POWs in Turkestan and the numbers of troops the Bolsheviks had. When Edrich asked whether he could see Statham's letter Compton laughed and said that in the current climate of terror in Tashkent as soon as he had read the letter he had destroyed it.

Compton spent several moments swatting flies then aware that Edrich was watching him he caught two flies such was his hand speed. After sprinkling his hands with water from a pitcher sitting on the garden table Compton rubbed them together before he wiped them dry on his handkerchief. 'I hate flies,' he said, 'the only good one is a dead one.'

He put the handkerchief away and took a sip of his tea. 'Abenkov and Sokolovsky know Zukoff, and his father. The father is a former officer in the Russian army and served in Persia, so he is Royalist. The son also served in

Persia in the Russian army then he took advantage of his connections to leave the army and begin trading in Persia – I doubt if he is pro-Bolshevik. He did contact me a few days ago to ask if you were genuine. We do have to trust someone and I think this is someone we can. If Zukoff is not what he says he is, then we will all be in desperate trouble.’

‘How can you ever be absolutely sure of who anybody is in the situation we are in,’ replied Edrich. ‘You never mentioned Zukoff to us why?’

There was silence as they both mulled over the last sentence then Compton said. ‘I’m sorry I had not spoken to you about Zukoff but to be honest I thought he had come to see you already and you were keeping quiet about it. I thought it best to say nothing because I believe in compartmentalisation or the fewer the people who know something the better. Zukoff represents a government to whom my government, I think, would support. Therefore part of my relationship is dealing with the British in Meshed through him and part is the unofficial American Government’s independent relationship with the FTU, if indeed it has one. It all makes it complicated.’

‘Good point. But why would he come to you first though?’

Compton stared trance like at his right boot as though it was made of gold then still with glassy eyes he said quietly. ‘Well of course he had the communication for me from Statham and he knew nothing about your mission, or if he did the stuff about whether you were genuine was a red herring. I haven’t told you everything about my role here as I do work for my own government - not the British. I can, I think, given the situation explain my task here. The one you know which is to try and stop the Germans getting their hands on the cotton by buying it if necessary. The other is to see that any support required by anti-Bolsheviks is channelled to them somehow. That is why I talk to Zukoff.’

‘How is this help to be channelled—directly or indirectly?’

Compton pursed his lips as he thought for the right words to use. ‘My government is being very careful how it handles these Bolsheviks and how it is seen to handle them. Many people use the term, “*Perfidious Albion*” to describe the country of your birth, Bill. Now don’t get angry,’ he said holding his hands up at Edrich, ‘sometimes it is convenient for other countries to use that common perception of your country for their own ends. Let me explain. President Hickson and America in general is looked on as a non imperialist country unlike Great Britain who is suspected of having designs on Turkestan.’

‘That’s nonsense, said Edrich.

‘I know but that is the perception here. Therefore because of that perception we know that your party here in Tashkent is being looked on as possibly the forerunner of an invasion. Obviously I am under less suspicion than you, despite having as many policemen follow me as you, and that gives me more latitude to do things. One of those things is to communicate, when allowed, with our embassy in Petrograd, our people in Moscow and our people in Peking. That communication may not necessarily be through official channels. You, Bill, on the other hand have had difficulty communicating with your people as you told Bolotnikov earlier.’

‘Yes.’

‘Now one of the things I have been told to do by my bosses is to provide you with the aid that you, as the representative of Perfidious Albion, might channel to our mutual friends here.’

‘What aid? Why not tell me this before?’

‘Money, arms and other supplies are needed by soldiers. Why not tell you before? Well I only got orders recently from our embassy in Moscow. It seems they did not know you were here nor what you were doing. I’m not sure by the way that your fellows in either Moscow or Petrograd know why you are here either. The crucial thing from the American point of view is that we will supply the various things that I’ve just mentioned but the anti-Bolsheviks must think that they are coming from you, the British.’

Edrich sat back and forced an ironical laugh and shook his head in wonderment. ‘And you call us Perfidious Albion—politics.’ There was a pause before he added, ‘what about my government providing help?’

Compton switched his gaze from his boot to a fly, which landed on the table he grabbed for it but missed. ‘Blast, should have got him. If they can get things to you fine. At the moment though, I doubt that they can do so. If they try to ship stuff through Persia then that has to come through territory controlled by the Bolsheviks.’

‘Well one can’t really get much from Kashgar because first, the Chinese may not allow it and second, to transport supplies from India to Kashgar and then onto here would be a logistical nightmare.’ Edrich said thoughtfully rubbing his chin with his hands.

‘I believe that the only way that we can get supplies to our friends is to smuggle them in via Siberia. Siberia need I point out is relatively close to America. However before we start doing anything I need to ask you Bill, as a military man, is Abenkov capable of leading an army against these ruffians?’

‘He talks well. He is imprecise about the troop numbers he has available. I’m not sure I believe him when he says he has thousands. Abenkov admitted that all his recent postings were as a garrison soldier. Commanding a garrison is hardly the ideal background for the type of war people seem to fight here.’

‘You mean up and down the railroad?’

‘Yes, I just feel uneasy about him. I am sorry I cannot give you a better military perception of the man.’

‘I understand. It conforms to what I think. Now Sokolovsky I think is the real political strongman but he can’t overthrow these Bolos without an army. So what do you think we can do?’

Edrich thought long and hard. ‘When I met Sokolovsky he said Abenkov is the man for the job. We have to accept Abenkov in that light. The only other alternative might be a Sart, I was actually given the name of one of the Bismachi leaders, Akbar, but obviously he I have yet to meet.’

‘Abenkov has been a professional soldier, which is more than can be said for some of these Bolos, so surely that must be in his favour?’ Compton raised his eyebrows.

Edrich laughed. ‘I certainly hope so. What about the Bismachi Sarts? Have you had any contact with them?’

'Not yet. I think we need to contact them directly if we can otherwise we do it through Sokolovsky?'

'Not through Abenkov?'

The American snorted. 'He doesn't see the Bismachi as real soldiers despite the fact that they are in the field and he isn't. As a result, and as you might imagine, Abenkov is not very popular with the Sarts whereas Sokolovsky is. Abenkov claims to have the Sarts in his army but I'm not sure. If we are to have a chance to overthrow these Bolos we need both Europeans because of their knowhow; Sarts because of their local strength and their current experience of actually fighting against the Bolos.'

Edrich remarked, 'well Abenkov told me his feelings about the Sarts which mirrors what he told you about them. I would prefer to go out and meet the Sart leader, Akbar, myself—but that won't be easy in this police state. So do I need to set up another meeting with Sokolovsky ask him to get me an introduction to our potential allies.'

'Yes. You need to realize that these Bolos would be suspicious of any Sart you met however you did so. It would put both of you in danger.' Compton drew an imaginary dagger across his throat.'

'I have no doubt on that score,' said Edrich nodding towards Compton's throat cutting action.

'Changing the subject back to Zukoff, what information will you entrust him with?'

'The actual number of POWs that there are here, broken down by nationality. India had the view that there were over three hundred thousand here, now we find out it's between twenty five and thirty thousand depending to whom you are talking. Anyway those statistics should ease India's worries over a German invasion. More important perhaps, I will be giving them as many details on the cotton stock as I can. You know more about that than me.'

'It is hard to judge because the crop has not been measured as thoroughly as it normally would be because of the civil war. My best estimate is that it lies between three quarters to one and a quarter million bales.' Compton added a look that said "I bet that surprises you." 'If I take the lower figure,' he shut his eyes and moved his lips silently, 'that equates to a hundred and seventy thousand tons. Not all of that of course will be for export,' he sniffed, 'perhaps half. But if the Bolos are short of cash—it'll be more.'

Edrich whistled, 'that is a lot of cotton and it will make a lot of ammunition. Robbins and Hutton will obviously take that information with them back to Kashgar but who knows Meshed may be able to get the information to Simla before the chaps can via Kashgar. What I won't entrust to Zukoff are the troop numbers that Abenkov claims he can put into the field until I have more proof. What we also don't want to do is to give Abenkov a large sum of money or a large number of rifles until we have more facts. In this climate he might abscond with the money or sell the rifles to whoever offers the best price.'

'If your last sentence turned out to actually happen then my State Department and your India Office would have our guts for garters.'

'I doubt we would be alive for them to do that, old boy.'

'What about you? What information are you going to send to your people?'

'I thought that I would not send the same information to my people just in case the code I have been using has been compromised.'

Edrich looked worried, 'do you think it has?'

'Not really, Bill, but if Zukoff gets arrested and they discover your message they might compare my coded message with that, then we are all compromised.'

Edrich murmured his agreement before he stood up. 'Denys, I must go. I have a few things to write so the chaps can take them with them. Will you come to dinner tonight to wish the others farewell?'

'Of course.'

'Come in Captain Fernee. Bad news I am afraid. We have had a message from India. You are to return to Ashkhabad.'

Fernee looked and felt disappointed. In the near distance the first shell of the morning fell. The Turks were advancing closer and closer to the city. 'I'll miss all the fun, sir.'

Oakes smiled. 'Yes you will. However having seen lots of your so called "fun" in my life I would grasp this opportunity, captain.'

'When do I go?'

'This afternoon—here are your orders.'

Chapter 66

Edrich was tinkering with his drawing of the cart and horses in his room when there was a knock at his door which slowly opened to admit a European whom he had never seen before. The man introduced himself in English as Voritch, and as the two men shook hands Edrich noticed their dampness. As if sensing this Voritch wiped his hands on his trousers. I'd rather you had done that first thought Edrich to himself. The man smiled and Edrich noticed a set of teeth that had different colours, white, yellow, grey and brown. The man gave the appearance of being poorly shaven, rather than being unshaven, with smooth shaved skin on his cheeks but there were tufts of hair under his chin. The man wore dark blue trousers and a worn jacket in the field grey of the German army.

'Please, sit down, Mr Voritch. What can I do for you?' asked Edrich as he made himself as comfortable as he could on his chair.

Voritch gazed round the room as though in wonder. Once the man had seemingly looked at everything he sat on the chair proffered. Voritch rubbed his hands again on his trousers looked round suspiciously again then fixed his gaze on Edrich. 'I think it is what I can do for you, Colonel Edrich, not the reverse.'

Edrich tried to place the man's accent, Central European certainly but it had some other inflection, which he could not quite place. 'Your English is excellent, Mr Voritch. May I ask you where you learned it?'

The other smiled. It was a lopsided smile with the right side of the man's mouth going up whilst the left side did not. He looked sinister Edrich decided at about the same time he felt a tension grip his stomach.

'I was in America for three years I studied and learned my English there. It is a hard place if you do not have money.'

'I have not been there like you have but I hear it is a wonderful place and that the people are warm and friendly,' Edrich said as he tried to sound as bland as he could.

They sat in silence for several moments. Then the man fumbled in his pockets and retrieved first a packet of cigarettes then after more fumbling a lighter made from a rifle shell case. The cigarettes looked as if they would fall apart unless Voritch smoked them quickly. Voritch offered the packet to Edrich who shook his head. Voritch lit up and sat alternatively inhaling the smoke and then looking at the burning end of the cigarette as soon as he withdrew it from his mouth. Still neither man spoke as Edrich watched the other like a hawk. Somewhere what sounded like a rifle shot was heard. At this Voritch put the cigarette back in his mouth with one hand and with the other put the lighter away in his trouser pocket.

'Someone breaking the law,' said Voritch looking at Edrich.

'Not something I do, I am a very law abiding citizen wherever I am. I was just admiring your lighter we had them in the British Army when I was fighting on the Western Front.'

'I started smoking in America. I have no idea where the lighter came from. I took it off a German who we had to shoot recently.' He reflected on his cigarette. 'Perhaps he took it off an Englishman. Who knows or cares.'

'Are you an official of some sort? You look I think, more Russian than Sart.'

'Thank you, Colonel Edrich, I am actually from Serbia and I am in the police force here.'

'Why are you here? I have to warn you that I am the representative of His Britannic Majesty's Government.'

Voritch look pained. 'Obviously I know who you are colonel and why you are here. I know you have done nothing wrong. This is not a trap.'

'No of course not,' lied Edrich.

Voritch gave him a sharp look and then smiled in his crooked way pulled hard on his cigarette before stubbing the butt out in a saucer Edrich proffered. 'You and your friends are in danger here Colonel Edrich, even though you will be leaving us this week. If the British Army advances towards Tashkent you might be arrested and held as a hostage.' Voritch paused, 'this might also happen to your friend Compton and any other Europeans here, but you,' Voritch jabbed his finger hard at Edrich, 'will be the main target. There are many in our government both here and in Moscow who think you are a spy and should be arrested and shot.'

Edrich's cheeks coloured and in a voice which he made sound as angry as possible 'I have told your Commissar that I have been sent by His Majesty's Government to find out what the local government in Tashkent is going to do about the Germans.' Edrich modulated his voice, 'but of course you know this.'

You also know that I know nothing of a British invasion of Russia as I have told your Commissar. Perhaps you would leave now?’

Voritch waved his hand, ‘yes, yes I know all that you have told the Commissar. Look, colonel, it is a very tricky situation here. None of us knows what will happen and what the outcome will be of the war in Europe and the fighting between the Bolsheviks and the counter revolutionaries.’

‘That has nothing to do with me. I am not seeking to stand on one side or the other. It is a Russian affair. We on the other hand are still fighting the Germans. Their defeat is our first priority—nothing else matters—I mean it—nothing else matters.’ Edrich allowed himself to relax back into his chair.

Voritch looked at Edrich impassively except that the man’s eyes betrayed what appeared to be a smile. Edrich wondered, as the man was a policeman whether he could intrinsically tell when another was lying; he hoped not.

‘You have been waiting for instructions from your government as to what you should do. Have you not?’

Edrich thought for a moment, ‘as my government’s servant of course I do as they wish. My government desires that every one of their servants stays within both British and the local laws. Yes, I have been awaiting a communication from India.’

Voritch put his hand in his jacket and pulled out a document and tried to hand it to Edrich. Edrich motioned with his hand that Voritch should put the letter on the table and that Edrich would then read it. This way Edrich believed would be less compromising. ‘Is this a personal letter to me? If it is then I should like to register my protest that it has been opened.’

Voritch grinned, ‘this is a document that someone in the Turkestan Government has received from Moscow. I think you may find it interesting. I translated it myself, as you do not speak Russian.’ The man’s gaze looked deep into Edrich’s eyes, ‘or should I say that you claim not to speak Russian?’ He slid the paper across the table and Edrich after a moment’s hesitation picked it up and read it.

Comrades, our chief aim is to encourage peoples across the world to throw off their yoke of oppression and to free themselves. In the east it is our intention to encourage the Muslims whether they are former subjects of the Tsar or current subjects of the British Imperialist to become rulers of autonomous states. Our principal enemy are the Imperialists of which the worst is of course Britain and the British Empire. The key target must be India because it has the largest Muslim population in the world. Muslims are also more militant and therefore the more likely to overthrow the Imperialists than the other religions. If the British can be overthrown in India then the rest of their Empire will fall like a pack of cards, to be followed by the Empire of the French Imperialists.

How can we achieve this I hear you say? First, I believe we must concentrate on Persia but at the same time keep the pot boiling in India. Now why Persia? Well the hatred felt by all Persians for the armed forces of Britain and the Tsar who first had entered Persia uninvited and unwelcome and who were there for their own economic benefits. Second,

those unwelcome two have plundered and ravaged the country on the pretext of protecting the Persians from the machinations of the Ottoman Turks. Note that the Turks were only in Persia because the Imperialists were there. Third, Britain seeks to protect the decadent Quajar dynasty and their feudal Khans, Sheikhs and Beys from the democracy demanded by the Persian peasantry.

The means to achieve our aim in Persia was through the creation of the Persian Communist Party that took place in Tashkent recently. Through this party we have the nucleus of a proletarian army who can create a Soviet in the disaffected north of the Persia and with our help and political support gain control of Tehran and then the rest of the country.

Once we have Persia then we have a bridge east to India and west to the Suez Canal. This canal is not only the gateway to Britain's Imperial territories but it stands close to another enemy of the proletariat—France and its North African Imperialist territories.

Edrich put the paper back on the desk whereupon Voritch picked it up and lit it using his lighter. Gingerly the Serb held the paper until the flame began to lick his finger whereupon he dropped it onto the saucer containing his cigarette stub. When the paper had shrivelled into nothing Voritch reached under his jacket again to produce a printed document on the same telegram paper he had just burnt. As before Voritch slid the paper across the table and again after looking at Voritch suspiciously Edrich picked it up.

It was a translation of a telegram addressed to the Head of the Tashkent Soviet Government signed by the Viceroy of India. The telegram stated that the Robbins and Edrich mission was on official Government business. That official government business was stated as being:—to identify what was happening to German and Austrian POWs and what the current situation was with regard to the sale of Turkestan cotton—it contained nothing about any invasion. As before when Edrich handed the document back to Voritch the latter burnt it.

Edrich and Voritch looked at each other waiting for the other to speak. Edrich fought hard to maintain his silence.

'Zukoff who is staying in this hotel has been identified by one of my contacts as being a member of the Turkestan Union.'

'Who?' said Edrich pulling a face that he hoped showed puzzlement.

Voritch looked tired as he said, 'your acting is commendable, colonel. The man you saw earlier who claims to be a Persian but is actually a Russian and seeks the return of the Tsar. I have a report on my desk stating this fact. I know that Zukoff leaves Tashkent tomorrow. I have many papers on my desk. Sometimes it takes me several days to read them all.' Voritch lit another cigarette then stood up. 'I am so very busy I cannot remember where that report is but I expect it is at the bottom of a pile.' Voritch shrugged then added as though speaking to himself, 'I really won't be able to start on that pile for three days and then it will take me all day to get to that report. I will then have to write orders for Zukoff's arrest and search Tashkent for two or three days before I telegraph towns outside here. I suspect that he will have headed north.'

To go south on the railroad would be too dangerous for him. Wouldn't you say, colonel?'

Edrich kept his face impassive. 'I really would not know, Mr Voritch. I understood the man was a Persian. He dressed like a Persian.'

Voritch turned to Edrich with a smirk, 'Are you going to tell me that dress will say anything about a man? To answer my own question—in a place like this where everyone only wears what they can get their hands on, I would say dress tells you nothing. Do not bother to disagree with me because you would be wasting my time which is short.'

'I would not want to do that.' Edrich was intrigued, 'now may I ask you a question?' The Serb nodded, 'I've heard about something called the "Bismachi Movement" which, I understand, consists of many different tribes of the Muslim Sarts who are both anti-Bolshevik, anti-European and may see their role as jihadists. I think they might be a threat in the future to India if they are jihadists. I wondered therefore as you are a policeman in the Tashkent Soviet can you tell me the truth about who they are, their current status, their numbers.'

Voritch laughed, 'I think this is a subject you should be discussing with a Commissar, but to me—the Sarts a threat to India? No. I am sure you know they originally started as an anti-Imperial Russian rising in 1916 and have nothing to do with India. As for whom they are? A bunch of disparate groups with a hodgepodge of ideas and ideals: anti-Tsar; anti-European; Pan-Turkic; Pan-Islamism Jihadists, to quote a few examples. Other groups are just bandits looking to raid caravans. Because they are so disorganised their threat to the Tashkent Soviet is minimal; the Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and Turkmen will never unite for more than about twenty minutes. The modern cross-tribe Muslims, the Jadids, who are anti-religion naturally support us against the forces of the mosque whose influence must surely disappear in the immediate future.'

'But there are thousands of Sarts.'

'Yes, but not all of them want to fight. The military stuffing was knocked out of the Sarts when Russia expanded into their territory during the last century. Now we estimate less than ten thousand in the various fighting groups because so many were killed in last year's attempted counter-revolution.'

'Aren't there some Europeans opposed to you?'

'Yes, perhaps a couple of thousand counter-revolutionaries exist without weapons, leadership and the most important thing of all.'

'Which is?'

'An ideology which appeals to the mass of the population, namely, the landless and the poor.'

'And your ideology fits the bill.'

'Yes, and it is coming to India according to information I have.'

'Indian Revolutionaries are being sponsored by the Bolos to return to India?'

'Freedom fighters, colonel, who want to go home with up-to-date Western ideas and ideals.'

Edrich reflected on what the man had told him. India would certainly want to know about the revolutionaries. 'Don't you want to return to Serbia—is that why you are on the side of these Bolsheviks?'

I support Revolutionaries not Bolsheviks. I support the former because as a Serb I am opposed to the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Yes, I'd love to return home hopefully when the Austro-Hungarian Empire is no more and a Greater Serbian state exists. As a freed POW if I went home I'd be back in the Army fighting for the wrong side again just as I was when conscripted into the Austrian Army in 1914. Though I lived in the Empire I am an ethnic Serb. As for being in the government here—well gets one gets more to eat by joining the police or army. Eating is important for me.' Voritch turned away and moved towards the door, then after two steps he turned round and spoke. 'It is your friends' last night in Tashkent, before they return to Kashgar so tell them "Be careful of what cotton is used for." I hope I shall see you again, colonel.' Voritch stood by the door waiting.

Edrich walked to the door and before he opened it he gingerly shook the Serb's still sweat ridden hand. Voritch left the room and Edrich watched him walk down the corridor until the man turned to descend the stairs. Edrich closed the door and then went to the window and watched from behind the curtain until Voritch appeared. Voritch crossed the street and said something to one of the men who was watching the hotel and usually followed Edrich. The watcher stood to attention whilst being addressed by Voritch who then moved on to talk to another watcher who usually followed Robbins. Once the Serb disappeared Edrich turned back into the room and retrieved the ashtray that held the ashes of the documents and Voritch's cigarette stubs which he deposited in the toilet down the hall. On returning to his room Edrich opened the window to let out the smell of burnt paper and cigarette. Whilst he waited for the smell to disappear Edrich again searched the room thoroughly for listening devices to no avail; he closed the window and then went and asked Robbins and Hutton to join him as soon as possible. Edrich related to the pair in detail what Voritch had said to him. When he had finished Hutton asked the obvious.

'Do you think he was an agent provocateur, sir?'

As Edrich began to answer he realised he did not have a clue as to Voritch's status. 'Well I am not sure. What I did see was him talking to a couple of the men who follow us. Interestingly they stood to attention whilst he spoke to them. So he is definitely an official.'

'The stuff about Zukoff why tell you that?' asked Robbins.

'It is accurate which is worrying but he's obviously saying he'll do nothing about it,' answered Edrich. 'As for the warning about Indian revolutionaries that is merely telling us what we already suspect.'

'Lull us into believing him,' mused Robbins, 'not clear for what purpose though.'

'I wonder how they know the Bolos will support these subversives and how they will get to India,' asked Hutton.

'These Bolos have established a Bolshevik party for Persia here in Tashkent then this is where an Indian Party may also be formed. If they do form an Indian Party here then I think revolutionaries will try to infiltrate India through Afghanistan and Kashgar. However the Indian Bolos could also use the Tashkent to Krasnovodsk railway, if the Bolos recapture it, to send subversives

to the Persian border, go to Meshed and from there infiltrate India. Now we know that the Russians are supporting Indian Nationalists we should warn Meshed about the possibility of Indian subversives coming through there.' Edrich looked at Robbins.

Robbins sat thinking and speculated, 'Why would Meshed suspect any Indians coming through Persia to India of being revolutionaries? It is such a long way round for Indians to go and it is an unpleasant and arduous journey.' He waved his hands. 'Zukoff will be carrying our report what happens if he is compromised and the Bolos arrest him. If you have the information about the Indian revolutionaries in that report it can be tied back to you. Voritch is the sole source of that information so is it a sprat to catch a mackerel.' Robbins shook his head, 'too dangerous, colonel. We'll forward the knowledge when we get to Kashgar. What about this policeman's warning about cotton and taking care this evening?'

'Probably talking about the quality of the food,' said Edrich with a grin.

Hutton said, 'We've eaten there before and it's not been too bad.'

'Spoken like a man brought up on English boarding school meals and captain, like you, I went to such a place where the food was the opposite of interesting,' Edrich pulled a face that made Hutton smile.

'I am worried about his remark concerning cotton that you two seem to relate to food. Joking aside, what do you think he meant?' asked Robbins looking nervous.

'Cotton is used in bullets as well as other armaments. Maybe someone is going to take a pot-shot at us or possibly we are being fed a red herring.' Edrich could see his flippant remark about a pot-shot made Robbins look nervous. 'Sir Walter, I suspect he only mentioned it because we've been talking about cotton so much.'

'We could eat in the hotel and take no risks.' Robbins looked at his two companions.

'We have arranged to meet Compton at the Dansansky Restaurant and I think that is where we should go if for no other reason to find out if anything is to happen. You know we have our service revolvers with us if anybody tries something. Will you Hutton be able to walk the four hundred yards to the restaurant?'

'Yes, colonel, for food I'll go farther. Do you really think the Bolos or Germans will try anything on our way to the restaurant?'

'Why would they do that,' asked Robbins.

'We or, indeed anyone is, at their most vulnerable when moving between two secure places like this hotel or the restaurant.'

Edrich looked thoughtful. 'I think the captain has a point, Sir Walter. We are secure here and at the restaurant but we are vulnerable on our walk.'

Robbins was now irritable. 'How do they know we are going anywhere? How do they know where we are going? In fact who are "They?" Germans? Bolos?'

'Half the Bolos are Germans and half the Germans are Bolos,' said Hutton knowingly.

'Do two halves make a whole, Hutton?' Edrich said trying to lighten the meeting. Nobody laughed and Robbins turned his head away deliberately.

‘Whichever it is doesn’t matter until it happens and if it happens, we’ll deal with it. At least we are forewarned. Hutton how is your packing?’

‘Finished, sir.’

‘To ease our minds, can you walk our route to the restaurant and see whether there are any places where we could be ambushed. It may be one side of the street offers better protection than the other side.’ Edrich looked at his watch, ‘we’ve got an hour and a half. Go now.’

When Hutton had left the room and his footsteps had died away Robbins turned to Edrich and said testily. ‘That man is completely stupid. I shudder at the thought of travelling with him to Kashgar for two weeks. I can’t imagine what we’ll talk about. Was it a good idea to send him out to spy the land, Bill?’

Edrich laughed, ‘I know I shouldn’t laugh but it is either that or cry. To be fair he has been on the North West Frontier and will know how to spot a sniper post or ambush spot.’

‘Up there consists of mountains here it is buildings.’ Robbins got up and opened the door.

‘I doubt that Hutton will notice the difference,’ said Edrich grinning to which Robbins replied with a snort as he left the room.

As always for security reasons the three men met in Edrich’s room prior to leaving for a restaurant. Each man had a glass of vodka as Hutton made his report on what he had observed.

‘All the houses on our route have trees in front of them. Some windows do have a view of the road but as far as I can tell their vision is limited because none of them look down the street only to the part of the road directly in front of them. So I believe a sniper would have very little time to fire more than two shots before we could get out of their line of sight, which I think precludes them being used by snipers.’

‘Have you thought that potential snipers could be in two separate buildings?’ asked Robbins.

‘Of course, the road can be seen from houses directly on opposite sides of the street but if they had snipers in each that would require the snipers to be co-ordinated and I think that would be difficult.’

‘Remember we could be dealing with Germans and you know how efficient they are, Captain Hutton.’ It was the first time that Edrich felt that Hutton had actually done some thinking.

‘I thought of that. If this is a German only plot how would the sniper have got any shooting practice? If they haven’t had any practice then they will recognise that fact. So they won’t use rifles but revolvers and for that they will have to be close—we just keep our wits about us. Another thing, if they open fire from a building as we walk along the street there is a good chance of hitting ordinary passers-by. Would they want to risk that?’ Hutton looked at the others.

Edrich thought for a moment. ‘Possibly not,’ he said, ‘however if they are in buildings they could leave by a back door quickly and disappear before anyone can re-act. If they don’t get caught then no one would know who these snipers are, so they could take the risk. I think rifle is more likely than revolver. I think this whole worry about being shot-at is a figment of our collective imagination. Trust Captain Hutton and me, Sir Walter because if we had worried about all

the rumours that we were about to be shot, by Pathans, whilst we served on the Indian Frontier we would be nervous wrecks—and we are not that are we Hutton?’

‘Certainly not,’ lied Hutton.

Chapter 67

‘Good Morning, sir.’ Fernee spoke with a cheerfulness that he did not feel. His lack of inner cheerfulness was not merely because he had left an exciting situation in Baku behind but across the desk facing him sat—Beaky Barrington.

‘You back again I see, captain. Why?’

‘I was told to report here, by General Barber, on my way back from Baku. I understand my orders as to what I was to do next, were being sent here.’

‘I have not seen any for you.’ Barrington then screamed, ‘Corporal Jones at the double!’

Fernee heard a chair being scrapped on the hotel’s wooden floor. A moment later the smartly uniformed corporal appeared, saluted and stood ramrod straight.

‘Have you seen any orders from Meshed concerning, Captain Fernee.’

‘No, sir.’

With a nod Barrington dismissed the corporal before switching his attention back to Fernee. ‘You obviously presumed wrong about General Barber. Look, we cannot have junior officers swanning around either doing nothing or, doing as they please as you seem to be doing. You seem to be going back and forth, hither and thither, up and down without a care in the world.’

Fernee was about to lose his temper but thought better of it instead he pulled out his copy of the orders Oakes had raised based on Barbers’ telegram. Barrington read the orders and finished them with a grunt that Fernee took to be an apology though the colonel looked neither contrite, nor uttered any words of apology. When the colonel handed the papers back to Fernee he looked perplexed a sign that Fernee interpreted as the man had no clue what to say or do about him.

‘What is happening about us fighting the Bolos, sir?’

‘I am not sure that I should tell you confidential information.’ Fernee did not know whether to laugh or cry at that statement. His face must have betrayed some emotion because almost apologetically Barrington said, ‘along the railway line up at Merv our chaps clashed with theirs. The Bolos outnumbered us so our FTU allies and our troops have withdrawn west to Kaakha. We are hoping soon to get more British reinforcements. Anyway I suggest you go to Ashkhabad perhaps they have your orders. You should go straight away.’

When Fernee got to Ashkhabad he found no orders but he knew he had to return to Meshed. Fernee asked the British Officer in charge of transport at Ashkhabad station if knew what was going on but he did not. Fernee then

asked the officer for help in getting transport back to Persia instead he got some surprising orders. His new orders, signed by a Brigadier Fishlock, instructed him to take the next train to Kaaka. The transport officer told Fernee that Fishlock had overall command of British troops in Turkestan and reported to Barber; the officer added that there had been fighting up the rail line which had not gone well. Any British soldier, who could stand up was being press-ganged to go up the line to join Fishlock. Fernee on receiving these orders wondered how his very dear commanding officer in Meshed would re-act to his latest escapade.

On his arrival at Kaaka station Fernee found its yards full of wagons and carriages of different types in one of which was the British headquarters. Fernee found as he walked through the yards that no matter what type of rolling stock confronted him it seemed home to soldiers either eating, sleeping, smoking or talking. Eventually in a Pullman car Fernee found a face he knew from his days on the Northwest Frontier—Brigadier Fishlock.

‘Good man,’ said Fishlock, ‘I heard you had arrived unexpectedly down the line. It was stroke of luck because you are exactly what I need. I have some idea what you have been doing but give me a brief overview.’

‘I have been with General Muncerville in Baku working with his intelligence officer, Colonel Oakes. The Turks are just outside the town getting ready to pounce on the place. Much of my work has been translating for the general and the colonel with the Baku government about how best to defend the place. General Barber ordered me to Krasnovodsk where orders would await me when I arrived they were not there. I was told they might be in Ashkhabad but they were not. I know General Barber desperately wants me back so I was organising my return to Meshed when I got your orders to report here. General Barber will not be happy about my non-return, unless he knows about it?’

‘Not yet he doesn’t. I’ll get a note off to him saying we will return you in one piece as soon as possible. Here is Colonel Squires.’ Fernee stood and exchanged salutes with Squires who appeared through a carriage door. ‘Come in and meet Captain Fernee, colonel.’ Introductions over, Fishlock continued. ‘Captain Fernee you will join my staff on a temporary basis. My staff will consist of you, myself and Colonel Squires. You will be my intelligence officer. The colonel commands the 19th Punjabis who are our main force of infantry. The Punjabis consist of four hundred and sixty men with thirty cavalry.’ Fishlock started coughing and when he stopped to sip water he looked at Squires.

Squires continued, ‘we have about seven hundred Turkmen and Russian troops with us. Unfortunately many of these men have never been trained and some have never fired a gun. The Bolos have about four thousand men so outnumber us by three to one. They have one aircraft we have none and they have more artillery than our three pieces. Yesterday the Bolos attacked in force and we only just held them. They retreated to their camp which is about two or three miles further east along the railway line behind a low ridge. Our one big advantage is that there is about a mile of open ground in front of our positions that they cross at their peril. Notwithstanding that fact we are expecting them to attack us again, probably tomorrow. A large part of their force seems to consist of Austrian and Hungarian POWs and they are certainly fine fighters.’

Not that we can always tell what nationality our opponents are because they have no uniforms to speak of.'

Fishlock, his coughing over, with a glance at Fishlock said. 'In the morning Fernee we will reconnoitre our positions. You can then see the conditions facing the Bolos and us. Now come next door and meet the Turkman in charge of the FTU troops.'

After Fernee had met the Russian staff and their commander, Oraz Sardar, he was given a blanket by Squires' batman and led into a dark railway carriage full of the sound of snoring men. Left to his own devices in the inky darkness to find a place to sleep Fernee proceeded to tread on several men much to their annoyance – admittedly only if they awoke. Eventually, Fernee by a process of listening for a lack of noise and being very gentle as to where he put his feet, he found a spot on the floor unoccupied whereupon he lay down and fell asleep.

The following morning whilst waiting for Squires to take him round the allied positions Fernee began to pace through the rail yards near the headquarters' railway carriage. As he passed one carriage where ammunition boxes were being unloaded a familiar voice said.

'Good morning, Captain Fernee.'

Fernee spun round to see, a grinning face poking out from the wagon. The face's owner jumped down and with hand outstretched was soon shaking Fernee's hand.

'Good Lord,' said Fernee, 'Mawle, seeing action at last?'

'Absolutely, Tom, I am in charge of the munitions as well as fighting with the Turkmen—nobody understands me or me them, still I am doing no: coding: decoding; ciphering; deciphering. What are you doing?'

'Just in from Baku and I was going back to Meshed when Fishlock hijacked me in Ashkhabad. So here I am instead of being with our beloved colonel' In the distance Fernee saw Fishlock and Squires leaving headquarters, 'I'm going with the Brigadier to have a look at our positions. I thought Squires was only a major.'

'He has got a temporary promotion to colonel. Don't get shot,' shouted Mawle to Fernee's departing back before he climbed back into the wagon.

Chapter 68

With the shortage of officers Fernee was appointed to a fighting role as well as his intelligence role. The soldiers he commanded consisted of Indians, Turkmen and Russians. Fernee was told that the troops he commanded were the least martial of the men available to Fishlock and therefore they were to act only as a reserve. Fernee split his group into an Indian force under their Subedar, whilst he led the Turkmen and Russians. His ability to communicate with his Russian troops was fine but to the Turkmen it was non-existent. There was no fighting on that first day of Fernee's new command—for which he actually thanked God.

It was on his second day at the Kaaka front, about an hour after sunrise, just as Fernee began to drink a welcome cup of tea when one of the Russian officers under his command shouted that he could see enemy troops through his binoculars. Fernee who had no field glasses was forced to listen to a running commentary by Russian that the Bolos' infantry and cavalry were outflanking the FTU and British forces.

Fernee realised that the Bolos were seeking to capture Kaakha village and its railway from the rear; this was confirmed when a short time later heavy rifle and machine gun fire broke out from beyond the station and its surrounding gardens. Like it or not Fernee decided he had to act. He sent the Subedar and his Indians to the left of the station whilst he led his group to the station's right. Slowly Fernee worked his way past the station and through the gardens towards the noise of the battle. As they progressed they came upon no enemies or much sign of them except for one abandoned machine-gun.

As Fernee progressed through the gardens beyond the station various FTU soldiers, not from his command, were sheltering there. These soldiers were coerced to join Fernee's force at gunpoint. Eventually the gardens gave way to a wide open space beyond which lay an old ruined fort pre-dating the Russian conquest. The Russians soldiers joined Fernee as he moved into the open area but the Turkmen held themselves back in the shelter of the gardens. When Fernee saw that the Turkmen were not following him he was just about to return to get them when he saw some of them pointing to the fort. Fernee turned and saw that men had appeared and were standing on the fort walls looking at them. When the Subedar and his Indian soldiers joined Fernee a few minutes later the former identified the men on the fort walls as Bolos. Fernee then ordered all his men to take cover, which basically consisted of them lying down and making themselves as small as possible.

It seemed to Fernee that the men standing on the walls were looking to surrender because they were doing nothing. After what seemed an age two emissaries appeared from the fort and walked to within shouting range of Fernee's troops. The emissaries shouted that the Bolos did not wish to fight fellow Turkmen and Russians so all those who were now fighting against them should surrender. A Russian FTU officer appeared from somewhere behind Fernee's group and went and had words with the two Bolos. After a conversation of several minutes the Russian Officer took out his pistol and led one of the emissaries past Fernee. As the Russian passed Fernee he told him he was taking the Bolo to see the Commander-In-Chief; the Bolo complained that he had come as a missionary of peace and should not have been subjected to an armed seizure. The second emissary after watching his comrade being led past Fernee's position returned to the fort whereupon all the men who had been standing on the walls disappeared behind them.

As if by some unseen signal, both sides opened fire at the same moment. Fernee told his men to stop firing as they could not see the enemy. Then as Fernee raised his head to look at the fort a bullet whistled past his ear—it had come from the rear. The Subedar raised his head and he too was nearly shot. Being shot at by the enemy was unpleasant by your own side doubly so. Fernee again raised his head to tell the Turkmen not to fire at their own side and a

second bullet thumped into the ground a few inches away. A furious Fernee sent a Russian to order the Turkmen not to fire on their own side.

As the enemy fire died away without causing casualties Fernee ordered an advance on the fort. As he took his first step forward, a searing pain in his thigh forced Fernee to drop to the ground—he had been shot. There was a lot of blood but the bullet had passed through his thigh without hitting a bone or artery. As he began to dress the leg with a handkerchief he realised that he'd been shot from behind. Furious Fernee lay on his side and shouted at one of the Russian officers to get the men forward. As the enemy were not firing he heard the officer encouraging the men to advance. Fernee watched his men get up in a higgledy-piggledy fashion and advance in short dashes towards the fort; still there was no firing. Once his men had passed him he turned and began to crawl towards the safety of the gardens. Just short of the gardens Fernee saw slightly to his right an Indian soldier with a wounded arm clearly trying to comfort, what appeared to be by his uniform, a British Officer.

Mawle gave a faint smile when he saw who it was had crawled to see him. 'Some bloody, careless bugger shot me from behind,' Mawle gasped in great pain before bursting into a coughing fit that threw up blood.

Fernee and the wounded sepoy exchanged glances that said this wound was bad. 'Me too,' said Fernee.

It was obviously too painful for Mawle to speak so the three wounded men sat in silence listening to the battle until picked by stretcher bearers. The bearers took the three men to the station where a railway carriage was acting as a hospital and where a British army doctor was in charge.

'How is it doctor?' asked Fernee, 'what about Mawle?'

The doctor smiled sadly. 'You are lucky. Unless you have somehow picked up some germs, it is a clean wound and will be fine in a couple of weeks. It is not a Blighty wound so no home-leave for you. However, you will go back with the rest of the wounded by train to Ashkhabad,' he looked at his watch 'in about two hours.' The doctor's voice changed timbre. 'Your friend will go with you but I have little hope for him I am afraid.'

Fernee for the next three days was in and out of consciousness not because of the pain in his leg but he'd picked up a fever. Mawle occupied the bed beside Fernee in the Ashkhabad railway hospital and was clearly in great pain. Whenever he was conscious Fernee tried to cheer his friend up and he was impressed by Mawle's stoicism. On the third day when Fernee's fever had finally broken a new patient was in Mawle's bed.

'Where's Mawle, where's Mawle?' demanded Fernee.

Fernee knew as soon as he saw the doctor sit on his bed. 'I am afraid he has gone. I am sorry that his place here for the last few days was so hard for him—I could do nothing. He was a brave man.'

Chapter 69

The road was busy with traffic and the pavement with pedestrians as the three Britons set off to the Danzansky restaurant. As the three men had agreed, before they left the hotel, they stopped and chatted frequently turning three hundred and sixty degrees to see if anyone was trying to approach them unobtrusively. Edrich felt the whole thing was stupid and regretted having told the others about the cryptic cotton message and what it might mean. The three Britons were delighted to see the secret policemen who were following them at their usual distances. As Robbins pointed out such was Bolshevik ruthlessness that if they were assassins they probably would not care if they shot some of their own men by accident. Edrich replied that if any assassin fired and hit one of the policemen who were thirty or forty yards away then all three Britons were probably safe as the shooter was clearly a poor shot.

Edrich was walking silently with Hutton about a hundred yards short of their restaurant when he noticed a horse drawn cart pass them on the far side. Edrich was sure that he had seen the driver before but he could not think where.

'You see that cart on the other side of the road, Hutton; just about to pass Sir Walter, I am sure I know the driver. Do you?'

Hutton turned to squint at the cart. 'I can't tell from here, colonel. All I can tell is that he is a European wearing German army trousers.' With that Hutton signalled Robbins by pointing at the cart. Robbins stopped and stood poised and watched the cart move slowly down the street.

'We forgot Captain Hutton that as we both are armed that one of us should be with Sir Walter at all times - wave for him to join us.'

As Robbins joined them there was a commotion back down the street. The three men turned to see the cart they had just watched, turn round and come towards them. Two cars then swept past the cart and began to accelerate towards the Britons throwing up clouds of dust. Edrich inadvertently crouched as the cars sweep past, but the car windows were shut. Edrich saw Bogdanovich sitting in the first car and Plasov in the second car, neither looked out of the windows. Suddenly Edrich was aware that Robbins was squatting down beside while Hutton had disappeared behind a convenient tree. The cart was coming closer.

'Get behind the tree with Hutton now, Sir Walter.'

Robbins moved with a speed that belied his age. Edrich himself began to move towards another tree further up the road undoing the flap of his service revolver as he went warily eyeing the approaching cart. The cart suddenly pulled up in the road about thirty yards from the tree under which Hutton and Robbins stood. Edrich watched the cart's driver light a cigarette whilst behind that cart shouts of frustration from the drivers of the horse drawn vehicles behind it thundered through the air.

Two soldiers on horseback shouted abuse at the driver as they trotted past the parked cart and one then started to dismount. Suddenly a car that had been going in the opposite direction swung round in front of the parked cart so violently that it almost overturned and just missed the two horses. The man in the throes of dismounting was nearly thrown but managed to cling to the saddle while the other horse reared up on its hind legs depositing its rider on

the ground. Edrich saw that the car's window was open and a gun was being pointed through it. As the car began to move the riderless horse kicked it and the car swung further out into the road so that the protruding gun jerked skywards and began firing bringing a shower of twigs down onto the road. The horseman who had been dismounting had somehow re-gained his seat but his horse in a panic burst into a gallop that brought it alongside the car. The gun disappeared as Edrich with open mouth watched the car and horse race down the street with seemingly neither under the control of its driver or rider.

In the meantime the parked cart broke into a gallop zig zagging past Edrich and up the road to the consternation of vehicles coming the other way. The cart driver lost his cap and cigarette as he fought to control the horses and apply the brake; the cart finally stopping in the distance. The soldier who had been thrown from his horse was screaming in pain and writhing on the ground. The whole road was full of human shouts and screams, horses neighing, and vehicles honking. Edrich looked towards their attendant police followers some of whom were picking themselves up from the ground, others reappearing from behind trees and parked vehicles. Almost as one they all began running towards the three Britons. Edrich quickly buttoned his holster and moved over to Robbins and Hutton.

'Anyone hurt?' Edrich asked regretting instantly his question as he saw blood trickling down Hutton's face. 'Where are you hit, Hutton?'

'On the head,' said Hutton dolefully, dabbing at himself with a handkerchief Robbins had produced from his pocket.

The phrase used by Hutton puzzled Edrich until Robbins chimed in with; 'Captain Hutton was hit on the head by a branch brought down by the gunfire.'

'You should always keep your cap on, Captain Hutton,' said Edrich relieved enough to make a joke at Hutton's misfortune.

'I do sir, but I fell over a tree root when I was trying to shelter behind the blasted thing. It wasn't a branch Sir Walter, I hit the tree with my head.'

'Oh God what now,' said Robbins angrily. The three Britons were now surrounded by eight of the men who kept them under surveillance; the ninth was limping up to join the others with blood seeping through a torn trouser leg. The policemen were arguing at the tops of their voices with one another. When Edrich asked Robbins for a translation he was told that the men were arguing first about who had jurisdiction and second what they should do about it. A few minutes after the argument had begun a uniformed policeman arrived. The uniformed officer uttered one word and that triggered all the plainclothes men to round on him ferociously and after that, the uniformed man stood mute.

'The ordinary police say this is their responsibility. The secret police say it is theirs because we are politicians of the Imperialist enemies whilst our military police chaps say they should be in charge because you and Hutton are soldiers. We could be here for a long time, colonel.' Robbins barked hands planted on hips.

'I could do with some water on my cut and some food,' said Hutton to no one in particular.

'Keep bleeding, please Hutton,' Edrich's remark received an astonished look from Hutton. Edrich realising what he had just said continued, 'it may help get

us to the restaurant.' Edrich turned to Robbins, 'tell them please, Sir Walter, that our comrade is clearly hurt and that we should dress his wound. Tell them we will do that at the restaurant and await their decision. Also point out we did not fire any shots ourselves and that this has nothing to do with us.'

Sir Walter addressed the various policemen then one man clean-shaven and wearing a smart Homburg hat that looked incongruous with the rest of his mismatched army uniform started shouting and gesticulating at him.

'He is accusing us of firing the first shots,' said Robbins out of the corner of his mouth as he faced up to the man. 'You take your gun out of its holster, Hutton?' Hutton shook his head whilst continuing to dab his wound with a reddening handkerchief.

Homburg hat ranted on even when told that nobody British had even unholstered their gun. Edrich need no interpretation to understand that the man did not believe that statement. 'There is a simple way of clearing this up. Ask him if he will allow me to remove my gun from its holster and then the bullets from it. Can Hutton do the same?'

What seemed at interminable discussion took place and as it did so the three Britons watched the street traffic get back to normal. Eventually Hutton and Edrich emptied their revolvers of their cartridges Edrich sniffed the barrels of both guns before passing them over to Homburg hat. The man sniffed and clearly did not know why he was doing so nevertheless he passed on the guns till all the men had a sniff. That done Homburg hat asked Edrich what the sniffing established and was told that it meant that they had not been fired.

'Can we go to our restaurant now,' said Robbins to Homburg as the latter returned the revolvers to the two Britons, 'dress our friend's wound and eat.'

'Yes,' said Homburg to everyone, and possibly his own, surprise.

'You might suggest to Homburg here, Sir Walter that it might be an idea for one person from each force go and report to their chief. We will promise only to go to the restaurant now, always stick together whilst we are there and go straight back to the hotel once we have eaten. At the same time they could give their bosses some idea of the car that shot at us.'

'Good idea,' Robbins said and repeated it to Homburg who listened as did the other men without a word until he had finished. An animated discussion then broke out between the policemen, which seemed to go on interminably as they tried to decide which one should have the privilege of making a report. Reporting to senior staff was not popular, remarked Robbins as he translated various snippets of conversation for Edrich's benefit. At one stage the uniformed man tried to join in the conversation but Homburg said just one word to him and the man reverted back into a catatonic state. Eventually Homburg told the British party they could go to the restaurant.

Compton was waiting for them in the restaurant. 'I was watching them interrogate you. When I saw them let you come here I thought I'd order for you in case they changed their minds. I heard the shots, so what actually happened? Captain Hutton you were hit.'

'Just a scratch,' Hutton said honestly. 'Throbs a bit. Still where's there's no sense there's no danger.' Hutton tapped his head gently and grinned.

Edrich thought Hutton's words accurate but decided not to say so. The three Britons then told Compton what had happened; the latter listened in silence except for the occasional whistle. Towards the end of their story their food arrived and all four men tucked in ravenously.

'It sounded like they used a machine gun,' said Compton with his fork half way to his mouth.

'A Lewis gun, Denys.' Edrich said once he had finished chewing a piece of mutton.

'How would they get their hands on a Lewis gun? That is a British weapon not a German, Austrian or even a Russian one,' Compton said before thrusting the fork into his mouth.

'We supplied the Russians with a lot of weapons over the past three years. Not too wonderful being shot at by our own ordinance.'

'I found being shot at was unpleasant in itself no matter what weapon was being used or where it was manufactured,' Robbins looked annoyed, 'here's our friend.'

Homburg hat marched up to the table and after a slight hesitation he handed Robbins a note before without a word he turned and walked away.

'I thought that he would arrest us,' said Hutton stating what the other two were also thinking.

Robbins read the note before he handed the note to Edrich and Hutton to peruse.

That done Robbins turned to Edrich. 'Commissar Plasov summoning us to a meeting immediately—he can't expel us quicker than tomorrow as Hutton and I are going then anyway.'

Robbins indicated with his chin and Edrich on turning round saw that Homburg with two men in leather jackets were waiting by the door. The body language suggested that the three were unsure whether to come over and drag the Britons out by force or wait for a few minutes.

'I think we need to go now,' Edrich said.

'Gosh, no pudding,' sounded Hutton whose voice's timbre mad the others laugh.

'Well maybe Mr Compton here will eat them for us,' Robbins observed as he stood. Edrich and Hutton followed suit busily thrusting the remnants of their food into their mouths.

'Good luck,' Compton said as he watched the three Britons wend their way to the door. 'I'll keep my eye out for you I promise.'

Colonel Statham marched into General Barber's office carrying an envelope as if it was red hot.

'We have some more news just in from Brigadier Fishlock in Kaaka,' he handed Barber the report.

'Open it and summarise it for me, Statham, I am busy.' said Barber handing the report back.

Statham opened the envelope took the paper out and scanned it quickly. 'It seems that our chaps were surprised by a sneak attack by the Bolsheviks two days ago. Fishlock says our troops gave a good account of themselves but our

so-called allies were found wanting.’ He paused as he read before speaking again, ‘it seems that some of the wounded were shot from the rear whether accidentally or deliberately is not clear. Twenty of our chaps were wounded including Fernee and we had one death.’ Statham paused, ‘Captain Mawle.’

Barber picked up a pencil and stared at it for a moment. ‘I’m sorry about Mawle. What about Fernee how bad is it?’

‘Apparently according to the doctor it is only a slight wound and should be right in a few days; he had a burst of fever which was worse than the wound. Anyway he and all the wounded have been evacuated to Ashkhabad.

‘Fernee’s a bloody intelligence officer he’s not a fighter what was Fishlock doing getting him involved in the fighting?’

‘Brigadier Fishlock was desperate, sir.’

‘I suppose so,’ he paused, grunted and nodded his head. ‘I think I will not have my officers idling their time away, particularly Fernee so if it’s only a flesh wound he can do some work. Get an order off to him and tell him that he’s going to be my representative with the Trans-Caspian government if necessary from his hospital bed.’ Barber waved Statham out of the room.

Chapter 70

Plasov was sitting at his desk but to one side when the three Britons were marched into his presence. Beside Plasov looking as sullen and as unfriendly as ever Chevosky sat in what was normally the former’s chair at the middle of the desk.

Plasov read from a piece of paper. ‘On instructions from Moscow, Sir Walter and Hutton are ordered to return to China immediately. I know you had selected tomorrow yourselves now it is an order from Moscow—don’t fail. You, Colonel Edrich, intended to go back later in the week I believe.’ He looked to Chevosky.

Chevosky leered at Edrich over the paper, ‘you will remain here until further notice.’

‘Why?’ Edrich leapt out of his chair in indignation—if he was going to stay he wanted it to be his idea not some thug’s.

‘Orders,’ snapped Plasov. He shrugged, ‘Comrade Chevosky will arrest you if you try and leave.’

‘What about the attempt on our lives this evening?’ Robbins looked angrily from one Russian to the other his hands in fists.

‘Anti European natives no doubt,’ Chevosky grunted before Plasov could reply.

‘They were European,’ Robbins jabbed with pointed fingers at the Bolos.

Chevosky pondered for a moment. ‘Not according to my sources. We will look amongst the Sarts where we will find them. We will keep Colonel Edrich here whilst we determine exactly what your armies are doing on Russian territory. I will ensure that Colonel Edrich’s safety is at the top of my list. Colonel Edrich

you must remain in the hotel. If you want to move to another hotel you must get my permission first. You may all go!

'You think Chevosky was behind this evening?' Robbins asked in Edrich's room as they all sat drinking vodka.

Edrich pondered for a moment. 'Yes. The gunman was definitely European. I cannot see the German POWs getting access to weapon like a Lewis Gun. Germans in the Bolo army could get one and I think I know why the attempt was made. If we had been shot, the Bolos could blame the German POWs led by Beckelmann. They could arrest Beckelmann and thereby entice, or press-gang, more Germans into their ranks.'

'It's called killing two birds with one stone,' observed Hutton.

'Good point,' Edrich's response was genuine. 'I think that getting these Bolo blighters out of the government must be a key priority from now on. I wonder whether the Bolos are in the pay of the Germans and that when the time comes they'll wave the green flag and allow the Hun to invade India. It would be nice to have some friends here once you have gone Compton is the only person left I trust. You realise that I may have to identify with any other anti-Bolos here,' Edrich grimaced, 'even possibly with Beckelmann.'

'Beckelmann! God forbid!' Hutton's look of horror made the others smile.

The following morning Compton presented himself at the hotel to wish Robbins and Hutton goodbye. The goodbyes took place in the foyer of the hotel and took over an hour. It took over an hour because the police under Homburg had searched all the baggage of the returnees shaking out clothes and generally made a mess that other hotel guests circumnavigated inevitably without a word or a second look at the mess except for one man who, for a few seconds, stood and looked at the shambles. The man was European and smartly dressed and when Edrich asked him who he was, the man shook his head and smiled.

The four men watched the police complete their mischief and as Robbins and Hutton supervised the re-packing of their cases. Compton and Edrich discussed the latter's plans.

'I think Colonel Edrich,' said Compton formally, 'that this place no longer suits you. I have taken the liberty of finding out whether there are any available rooms for rent in the street where I am living. There are rooms in a house a few doors down from my house. You will obviously have to get permission from Commissar Chevosky, but I think you'll get it because it eases their observations on the two of us living in adjacent properties. Also my physical and close-by presence may reduce any threat to you the Bolos might have up their sleeve. On your own here in the hotel is risky—there are too many rooms, corridors, stairs and people wandering in and out. The move may only be for a few days before they expel you, but I recommend you do it. Another advantage of my proposal is the daughter of this house speaks Persian, so she can help you with your Russian if that's not too convoluted. How goes that by the way?'

'My Persian's not that great to begin with, so learning Russian that way might be interesting. I did think I understood about half of what Plasov's said last night so with Bedi returning to Kashgar I was wondering who could give me lessons—is she attractive?'

'Very.'

Edrich smiled. 'Sounds like it would be nice to be living close to you. So, I shall come and look at both woman and house and see if they are acceptable. If they are I'll ask Plasov immediately if I can move,' Edrich paused and looked at his countrymen as they in turn stood watching their Indian servants pack their baggage in a lorry. Edrich added with a shrug, 'though whether I will be in Tashkent in the light of events further west for much longer I cannot say. I am, "a hostage to fortune," without any doubt.'

'The smartly dressed European you saw just now, I saw him last night in the restaurant. He says he is a Swiss German - I wonder. Whatever the man is doing here we must find out!'

'How do you tell a Swiss German from a non-Swiss German?' Edrich muttered.

'Well as neither of us speaks German that will be difficult. If he is Swiss working for the Germans perhaps we get our governments to put on pressure Switzerland to stop him. When you have said your final goodbyes, come and see your prospective lodgings. After that we should play some whist.' Edrich and Compton shook hands.

'That sounds exciting. I will do that.' Edrich watched Compton bid the other two Britons bon voyage before he disappeared down the street.

A few minutes later Edrich shook hands with his mission companions and watched their car and baggage lorry pull away from the hotel followed by two cars packed with police. After the procession disappeared Edrich set off for Compton's lodgings. Edrich had only gone a few yards when he glanced back to see if his police shadows were with him; they were. As he looked at his shadowers he saw something else that made him stop and return to the hotel.

Edrich re-appeared a few minutes later with one of the hotel staff who carried a chair. The chair was quickly set down in the spot where Edrich had looked at his police escorts moments before. 'Never draw a building straight on always draw it from an angle' his teacher had told him. The way the light caught the building and the shadows it threw up just made Edrich want to draw it. Edrich had about half an hour and then the sun would have moved too much and made the shadows different. Quickly he began to sketch and wished that he had a camera to record the moment.

Author's Note

What the First World War means to me.

My submitted entry to the Friends of the Imperial War Museum competition 2014.

I read "*Our Island Story*," by H E Marshall, when I was about ten years old and began a lifelong love of history and books. Unsurprisingly, history became my best academic subject and within that subject one topic chose me: the First World War (WW1). My interest in WW1 developed whilst listening to my parents' childhood memories and seeing limbless men begging in London's streets.

Throughout my life I have read as many histories, biographies and autobiographies of the conflict that I could buy or borrow from my public library. Because this war was fought worldwide there was always something new to discover, particularly once I started researching in the India Office Library and the Imperial War Museum. The conflict even inspired me to write a novel and a radio drama. Trips to the battlefields gave me perspective and one such trip inadvertently brought me happiness of a different kind.

In late September 1951 I went to a new school by bus travelling past the Cenotaph in Whitehall. In the early 1950s nearly everyone wore a hat and on passing the Cenotaph doffed their headwear. I had to change buses just to the west of the Cenotaph where an old man stood next to the bus stop selling matches out of a tray and beside him, begging, stood a man without an arm. I asked my father who the men were and he replied, "Soldiers from the First World War." When I arrived at school we congregated in a Hall that contained the portrait of six former pupils who had won the Victoria Cross in the WW1: five soldiers and the captain of a "Q" ship. So despite being born during the Second World War, seeing bombsites everywhere in London, I knew about the earlier conflict at nine years of age.

During the Second World War nobody in my family was killed. Father was a police sergeant at Bow Street police station, one of his brothers, Joe, lost a leg in the battle for France in 1940, and his other two brothers were in the Royal Navy—Jack was sunk at least twice and Stanley was torpedoed on the Murmansk run. This was in contrast to my father's family fortunes in the WW1. In November 1916 my grandmother's youngest brother, Stanley Griffiths, a private in the Welsh Regiment, died of his wounds in Swansea after fighting on the Somme. My father, then aged 8, was taken to see his uncle lying in his coffin. When my grandmother saw her brother she said, "I'm going to name the child I am carrying after my brother, if it's a boy," and so my uncle was named "Stanley". Earlier in 1916 my father remembered meeting his mother's eldest brother, David Griffiths, wearing the blue uniform of a wounded soldier; he'd had a toe shot off in 1915. On 1st July 1916 David, serving in the 2nd Devonshire Regiment, "went over the top," never to be seen again.

My mother's family were Londoners and in 1952 my maternal grandfather took my elder sister and me on a visit to Highgate where he was born. Whilst there, we bumped into granddad's youngest brother, Harry, who had won the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal while serving in the Post Office Rifles as a sergeant. Sadly, I do not remember the meeting but according to my sister the two brothers hardly exchanged a word—both displaying the warmth so typical of that side of the family. My mother remembered that when the Zeppelins came over London in 1918 and the anti-aircraft guns fired, she and her nine siblings hid under the family piano. How they did they all fit?

My father joined the Metropolitan Police in 1929 beginning at Tottenham Court Road Police Station. Many of the men my father served with had survived the trenches. My father, keen to get promotion, was zealous in his duties but he always commented with a smile that the trench survivors he served with were completely different. He said these ex-soldiers were never fazed by anything or anybody, including the strict army discipline espoused by their unpleasant

superiors. Apparently these ex-soldiers would stroll benignly around their “beats” with never a care in the world, and never seemed to arrest anybody. When one of these men, Jack Audley, arrested a well known criminal, Rubberbones Johnson, who was waiting in a bus queue, everyone at the station was agog. Johnson had had plastic surgery and looked completely different from his wanted poster. “My powers of observation, honed in the army, came into play,” explained Jack to the amazed station. Amazement faded when it was learnt that a school fellow of Johnson’s had pointed him out to Jack who just happened to be standing day-dreaming near the bus stop.

In the early 1930s my father, injured playing rugby, was waiting outside the police doctor’s office to see whether he was fit for duty. Also waiting apprehensively for the doctor was a policeman who had fought in the trenches. The ex-soldier’s health was being reviewed because he had been off sick three times in the year with chest complaints, and three sick absences were the maximum allowed within a year by the police. Ten years police service earned a small pension and this policeman had served for a few months short of ten years. His chest complaint related directly to his being gassed in the trenches, but he was thrown out of the service that day.

My mother, an avid reader of fiction, possessed only one non-fiction book: R H Kiernan’s biography of TE Lawrence. This was the first adult history book I read, aged about twelve. The book aroused my interest in Lawrence so that whenever a new biography is written about him, I have to read it! About the same time I discovered in a cupboard a collection of the 1930s magazine, “*I Was There*.” That magazine’s articles were written by veterans about their experiences on air, land and sea during WW1. Its photographs of the Western Front particularly shocked me to see men living in such conditions. Reading the complete collection of the magazine cemented my interest in WW1, but I needed something more substantial.

My local library, Holborn, had a policy that people under 16 could not take out adult books. My father rarely read books and never visited the library so I got him to join it. I then used father’s adult tickets to read all the WW1 books in Holborn Library. Mostly they were the British and Australian Official Histories of the War—not the most excitingly written tomes for someone of twelve or thirteen. But it was a start. Once I started earning a living I began to build my library of books without a thought as to where to put them (still a problem over fifty years later). I usually bought books but once when I was a Polytechnic Computing Lecturer I did some private computing work for a publisher who paid me with four WW1 books.

At first my interest was only in the Western Front but I keep discovering new aspects about the war that have seized my attention. I visited Vienna in 2012 and found “*Armenia 1915*,” a locally published book in English. This book describes how the Ottoman Empire was enacting ethnic cleansing against the Armenians in 1915. The Armenians appealed to the Ottoman Empire’s Christian Allies for help. Germany ignored the appeal whilst the Austro-Hungarians tried to help the Armenians, but they were too weak to achieve anything. In December 2013 I finished reading Edwin Hoyt’s book, “*The Army Without A Country*,” that describes how the Czech army fought its way round

Russia 1918 -1920 in its effort to secure Czech independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In January 2014 I have begun to read, "*When the United States Invaded Russia*," which is the story of the US and Allied Intervention in Siberia. Once I have finished that book then I will read the new biography of President Woodrow Wilson. The subject just seems to grow.

In 1985 the last official history of the Great War was published: "*Operations in Persia 1914 to 1919*." What puzzled me was the date "1919." I was always led to believe that the war finished in November 1918. I began an investigation into the whys and wherefores of a part of the war that I never known anything about, the British involvement in Persia and Central Asia, and why that involvement lasted into 1919. My research began in the files of the India Office, the Army library, the Imperial War Museum library, and the National Archives. Books, of which there were surprisingly few, led me to understand that British policy perhaps was not contradictory but merely that the right-hand and the left-hand had absolutely no clue what each was doing. I made notes of my research initially thinking I might write a history book but changed my mind and decided to write a novel based on the events that occurred in Central Asia during the spring and summer of 1918.

The arrival of the internet has had a positive impact on my research. I have been able to find historical papers and writings by historians on websites. I can more easily find books on websites to buy, particularly those which are out of print or are published by specialist publishers and which are not often stocked in bookshop chains.

Over the last thirty years I have written novels and scripts for film, TV and radio. The first thing that I wrote was triggered after I read a book on the cricket matches played between England and the visiting Australian in 1921. This book mentioned that one of the England players, AJ Evans, had written a book called, "*The Escaping Club*". After a long search I found a copy of the book which describes ex-RFC pilot Major Evans' capture and escape from both Germans and Turks. I decided to write a Radio Drama based on A J Evans' exploits as a WW1 Prisoner-Of-War (POW) and as an England cricketer in 1921. As the Australian cricketers visit the UK every four years I wanted to time the series to coincide with the next tour by the Australians. Whilst Evans' book was the basis for the series I needed more detailed information. My investigation took me to the IWM library's collection of POW reminiscences and letters home (none were from Evans). The collection described how, for example, money, maps and wire-cutters were smuggled to the POWs by their mothers. During the Second World War POWs were helped by a specific organisation, MI9, to which Evans belonged. Evans used his experiences to advise how MI9 could help POWs in their life "behind the wire." Evans also lectured Allied airmen on what to do to evade capture if they were shot down. The first episode of my series described Evans flying over German lines in 1916 under shell-fire, then batting helmetless in 1921 against the Australian fast bowlers, Gregory and MacDonald, whizzing a cricket ball past his nose at about ninety miles an hour. Unfortunately, the BBC rejected my scripts and when I rewrote them as a film script a film producer did the same.

By the early 1990s my historical attention switched wholeheartedly to British involvement in Central Asia in 1918 and I spent Saturday mornings at the India Office library near Waterloo Station investigating official correspondence and the secret papers of men like FM Bailey and R. Teague-Jones. In 2001 I retired and as more books on the subject were being published and the internet had arrived, I decided to use my imagination and write a novel rather than a history book. I abandoned this novel, "*The Cotton Spies*," in 2006 to write a sports novel that I self-published in 2011. In June 2013 I began to write a new sports novel but stopped when I realised that I had put too much effort into the "*The Cotton Spies*" to let it languish. Since June I have been re-writing and editing the novel which I will publish as a free e-book in 2014.

I took my parents to the WW1 battlefields in 1985 as a golden wedding anniversary present. My father was moved to see his uncle's name commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing. My next trip to the battlefields in September 1988 was with a friend, Winston. My journey started with a chance encounter with an American woman on Reading Station. The encounter lasted barely half an hour but led to our marriage the following August. That pleasant interlude was not followed by good weather for the trip to the battlefields. After a dreadful crossing of the Channel, which saw me violently seasick, we spent three days in cold, damp, misty weather. It was Winston's first trip to the battlefields and he had researched what to see. We stood on Passchendaele ridge. Despite patches of mist, the view to the plain below was amazingly clear. It was no surprise that the Germans could see the Allies' troop movements; they could probably spot a field-mouse foraging for food. In drizzle we stood by Essex Farm Cemetery where Lieutenant Colonel McRae, wrote his poem, "*In Flanders Fields*," following the death of a comrade. We stood at Hyde Park Corner Cemetery by the grave of one of England's greatest rugby players, Ronnie (Poulton) Palmer.

In August 2013 my cousin in New Zealand found and sent me a copy of a photograph of my two great uncles killed in 1916. Contact with another cousin turned up a torn newspaper notice of my Great Uncle Stanley Griffith's funeral and where in Swansea he was buried. Now in 2014 I will visit his grave for the first time because he was family and a reminder of how much the WW1 has meant to me.

We must commemorate that the war brought independence to many countries including Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuanian, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. We must commemorate the war for the monumental changes it brought to British Society. First, it gave women them the chance to show they could perform work that was once deemed the prerogative of men. Second, the rigid pre-war class structure was dealt a blow because living in the trenches forced men from all levels to tolerate and understand each other. Finally, we need to commemorate the sheer numbers of men who fought and died as well as those who survived or were maimed in the hope future generations will learn enough not to blunder into what some called this war: "*Armageddon*".

[**Ed. Note:** The very sloppy style of text has been retained.]

