The Traitor

by Brian Freemantle, 1936-

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Jack Harding, who was an experienced intelligence officer, decided that the pick-up was going very well indeed, just like all the others before it: this time tomorrow he would be back in London, another mission safely accomplished.

The dead-letter drop, the place where messages were left for his collection by spies within East Berlin, was just beyond the road bridge over the River Spee. It was an area, bordering the water, of old buildings, some of which even now remained shells gutted by wartime bombing. The drop was in a burned-out building, a blackened, hollow place without a roof: pigeons nested in its skeletal rafters and an occasional flower or stunted bush grew in the wall, roots clinging to the accumulated dirt and bird filth.

The entrance was inadequately closed off by two crossed pieces of wood, nailed into the supports of a long disappeared door. Harding went in quickly, pulling himself at once against the interior wall, waiting for several minutes, alert for a

curious challenge from anyone who might have seen him enter the abandoned house. There was nothing.

The actual drop, the cavity he had to empty, was close to one of the fragile bushes. The brick that covered it slipped sideways as soon as Harding pushed it. The film roll lay in a small crevice.

Harding snatched it out, listened for the sound of any passer-by at the boarded-up door, and then thrust out when he heard nothing.

There was a small park, little more than a tiny grassed area, where the road joined the Friedrichstrasse. Harding chose an unoccupied bench seat and opened the camera bag he'd brought with him into communist East Berlin to smuggle out the spy film he had just picked up. The bag contained a camera, an expandable tripod, two spare lenses and five film rolls. Two were already exposed with tourist shots of West Berlin. In seconds he switched the spy film for one of the unexposed films, in its plastic container. Then he stood, with the unused film concealed in the palm of his hand, went to a nearby litter basket and dropped it in, not on the very top where it would have been obvious but beneath a discarded newspaper.

He made his way slowly towards the crossing back into the West at what, before the breaching of the Berlin Wall, had been Checkpoint Charlie, remembering he still had a going-home gift to buy for his wife. Because everything had gone so well he'd be back in West Berlin within half an hour. It left him plenty of time to look around the stores.

Although there were no longer the border checks there had once been, the tension, the real stomach-tightening, started as Harding came in sight of the Berlin Wall, now nothing more than a historic monument. He controlled it, as he had coming over that morning, joining the line of returning people wending through the intricate zig-zag of steel barriers.

The seizure came when he was exactly in the middle of the old checkpoint, too far in to be able to turn and run back into the East but not far enough to make a dash for the West.

„Halt!" came the shouted order.

Harding did, suddenly aware that following people had been held back, isolating him in the middle of a cleared area.

„Me?" he said in English, pushing outrage into his voice.

The man who was approaching from behind wore rimless spectacles and a tightly belted leather topcoat. He said: „Let's not play games, Mr Harding. We know who you are and why you are here…" He extended his right hand, palm upwards. In it was the unexposed film roll Harding had discarded by the river. „You left this behind," the man said.

No one could remember who had given the Factory its nickname. Certainly it was before Samuel Bell had been appointed Director General after his early retirement, with the rank of admiral, from the Royal Navy. It was unarguably an appropriate title because that was exactly what the place did look like, a square, red-brick, eight-storey, ugly building in the Mile End Road in East London, the sort of factory in which, long ago, children had been employed practically as slave labour to make gloves or shoes or trinkets-of-the-moment for the rich. From the

name plates on the outside wall and the genuine activity on its ground floor it now seemed to be divided into dozens of small offices.

Its real use, as the headquarters of an operational division of British overseas intelligence, only became apparent on the first floor, beyond which it was impossible to travel in the one available lift. That lift opened to a wire-meshed, electronically monitored security area where officers had to be satisfied of everyone, even Bell himself, before permitting access to the second elevator and the floors above.

The Director General's office was on the top, eighth floor, an expansive corner suite overlooking the Mile End Road in two directions. Bell was uninterested in the view, which was not a particularly attractive one at the best of times and certainly not that day. It was raining, the water scudding down from a heavily overcast sky. The weather, however, had little to do with Bell's foul-tempered mood. Physically he felt awful, his head filled with pain, eyes squinted against what little light there was, the acid of the previous night's drinking burning the back of his throat. The hangover he could have endured, as he did most days. The real problem was the Berlin business: and more importantly, how he believed it to have happened.

„It's been positively confirmed," said Jeremy Thurlow. The deputy Director General was a coldly unemotional man. He was extremely thin and tall and wore department store clothes which never fitted properly, hanging away from his body at the neck, with sleeves and trousers always too short. Thurlow added: „The accusation is spying. The public prosecutor is demanding the maximum sentence."

„Poor bastard," said Bell with feeling. The arrest of Jack Harding brought to four in the last six months the number of agents under his command who had been arrested on missions. Which was too many to be put down to bad luck or improved efficiency from the counter-intelligence services of the other side. His four lost officers had been targeted and there was only one source from which such identification could have come. From inside the Factory itself. Somewhere, Bell was convinced, there was a traitor.

„They waited until Harding had the film on him," said Thurlow. „There's practically no defence to keep him out of prison."

„So we've lost the plan of battle for the East German front-line troops that the film was supposed to contain," assessed Bell. „We've lost Harding, one of our best operators. We've lost the dead-letter drop. And we've undoubtedly lost Gunther Schmidt, who's been our spy-in-place in the East German Defence Ministry for five years. They'll have seen him fill the dead-letter drop if they were watching it, which they undoubtedly were."

„A disaster," agreed Thurlow.

So what was he going to do? Bell asked himself. If he behaved with absolute and proper professionalism there was no choice. He had to call in internal security to conduct a sweeping investigation of his entire department. But was it possible for him to do that? The Director General knew how such investigations were conducted. No one, not even himself, would be above suspicion. Everybody would be probed to the bone, until there were no secrets left. Bell did not believe he could personally afford that. He couldn't risk discovery of the affair he guessed his out-of-love wife to be having, because that might be considered a security risk quite

apart from the traitor hunt. He couldn‘t chance the uncovering of his own affair with Ann Perkins, his personal assistant. And he couldn‘t risk the disclosure of how much he needed the whisky in the bottom drawer of his desk, which carried him through until the whisky at night, either at home or at Ann‘s apartment. To his deputy he said: „So there‘s not a lot we can do for Harding?“

Thurlow shook his head. „We can look after his family, I suppose. There‘s a wife. And a son at college.“

„How long will he get?“

„The maximum is twenty years,“ said Thurlow. „I‘d guess fifteen: ten if he‘s lucky.“ The man paused and said pointedly: „There‘s been a lot of people detected in a short time.“

„Yes,“ agreed Bell. He supposed the observation was to be expected from his deputy: Thurlow was an intelligence expert, as he himself was supposed to be.

„You think maybe we‘ve got an internal problem?“

„Not yet!‘ said Bell, too quickly. „I don‘t want to make any hasty decisions to have the place turned over. You know what an upheaval it would create.“

„Do you think it‘s safe not to?“ pressed the other man.

Bell was convinced he‘d kept anyone at the Factory from knowing of his drinking, and he didn‘t think there was any gossip yet about himself and Ann. But he didn’t want gossip of another sort, rumours about his bad management from someone like Thurlow. Inadequately he said: „I want to think about it.“

Samuel Bell was a big man: well over six feet tall and powerfully built, broad-shouldered and deep-chested and with the upright bearing of the high-ranking naval officer. He looked impressive in uniform, the sort of man who inspired confidence and other men found easy to obey. Although he no longer wore uniform the attitude of command remained with him and he wanted to retain it. He thought he knew how to. At the moment he only suspected there was a traitor: there was insufficient evidence positively to confirm it. It would be premature to bring in internal security. Their intrusion into the workings of the Factory would be an upheaval: no one trusting anyone else, friend turned against friend, enemy given excuse to move against enemy. Whatever the outcome, the Factory would never be the same again. So it was right to wait, to hold back from a course of action that might wreck its smooth running for years to come.

But it would be wrong for him to do nothing. Refusing to acknowledge it as avoidance of what he really should be doing, Bell decided to carry out his own, personal, investigation. He recognized it would be dangerous, reprehensible even, but convinced himself it was the correct course. If he found the traitor, he could deal with him in his own way. If one didn‘t emerge—if the four arrests had been bad luck or an unconnected set of coincidences—he would have kept the Factory intact, properly undisturbed.

„You‘re quiet.“

It was Bell‘s night to stay at Ann‘s apartment: the excuse to be away from the family home and from Pamela was the regular Tuesday meeting of the joint intelligence services, although his wife wasn‘t really interested in any explanation. Bell said: „I‘ve one or two things on my mind.“

„I was sorry about Jack Harding.“

„So was I: he was one of the old-timers in the department when I took over," said Bell. For how many people would he have to bait traps? Quite a few, he calculated. Maybe eight active agents. Thurlow, too, because no one was beyond suspicion. Not even Ann herself. Bell smiled across at her. She was a tall, strong-featured woman, dark-haired and clear-skinned: he wished he could find it easier to love her now that he'd lost his wife's affections. Ann was very beautiful and said she loved him, and Bell believed her.

„It's making people uneasy," she said.

„Me most of all." So Ann was thinking like his deputy, realized Bell. Soon the rumours would start. He offered her his glass and said: „Get me another drink, will you?"

„Don't you think you've had enough, darling?"

„Just one more," he insisted.

„I wish you wouldn't drink so much."

„It's not a problem."

Bell was well aware that the snares he intended setting had to be specific, positively to identify the traitor without any possibility of mistake. He decided first to test the field operatives, the active agents who every time risked their liberty or their lives.

George Fowler was one of the longest-serving officers. A plump, rosy-cheeked man who laughed a lot and ran a boy scout unit near his home at Richmond. Peter Whitehead occupied the adjoining office on the fifth floor of the Factory and so the two were work-place friends although dissimilar in attitude and appearance: Whitehead did not find much to laugh about and was a pale-faced, critically minded man.

The Director General chose Fowler as the bait in the trap he set for Whitehead. It was an exploratory mission, a trip to Paris where a cultural attaché at the Hungarian embassy had hinted at a British embassy reception that he might be willing to spy upon his imminent return to Budapest. Fowler was to make the contact, with Whitehead as the protective back-up.

No one else at the Factory was told anything about the operation, so that only Whitehead could possibly have been the informant if Fowler had been seized. He wasn't. The Director General simply reversed the roles for the test upon Fowler. This time it was to collect details of China's nuclear capability smuggled from Beijing by a disaffected junior official in the Ministry of Technology. Again it went perfectly and Bell decided that in the two men he had loyal, trustworthy officers.

Jane Snelgrove was one of the two female agents at the Factory, an attractive blonde who spoke four languages and who, five years earlier, had been actively considered for the British Olympic swimming team. Bell paired her with John Walker, a pipe-smoking, chess-playing bachelor. And once again gave each an assignment known only to the other. Jane went without incident into Warsaw to bring out an agent whom the Factory believed to be exposed and upon the point of arrest. And Walker, with Jane Snelgrove keeping watch, successfully broke into the London office of the Soviet trade organization and removed from its safe classified details of stolen British technology shipped to Russia.

And Bell crossed both names off his list and felt secure with two more loyal officers.

William Dowling, a small, clerk-like man, was the next to pass the test, escorting across the border from Russia into Finland a Soviet defector whom the Russians would most definitely have stopped if they could and if Dowling‘s partner, Henry Millington, had been the hunted traitor. And Millington, a slight and swarthy linguist, returned unscathed from a photographic spying assignment of Baltic shipping movements upon which he had been guarded by the other man.

To set those failed traps took a month and left Bell more unsettled than when he‘d begun baiting them. Unquestionably he had confirmed the trustworthiness of six operatives. There were only another two field agents to be tested.

„I‘m going away. I don‘t know for how long.“ It was an announcement, not a request or a question. Pamela, Bell‘s wife, stood challengingly in the lounge of their north London home, one hand upon her hip. She was a petite but big-busted woman conscious of everything about herself. Her blonde hair was perfectly coiffured, her make-up perfectly applied, her weight-maintained figure perfectly enhanced by a figure-hugging dress.

„All right,“ accepted Bell at once, because he wasn‘t interested in arguing or asking where she was going. He stood at the drinks tray, making his third—or was it the fourth?—whisky and soda.

„A golfing holiday, in Scotland,“ offered the woman anyway. „James is going too.“

James Whittaker had been the best man at their wedding. It was the nearest Pamela had come openly to admitting that the man was her lover.

„That‘ll be nice,“ said Bell, barely polite.

„You don‘t mind?“ demanded the woman. When she expected opposition she became bird-like, making quick, sharp movements.

„Would it make any difference if I did?“ said Bell wearily.

„No,“ said Pamela at once. „Are you going to stay drinking all evening?“

„Probably.“

„Sleep in the spare room then. You make disgusting noises when you‘re drunk.“

„Sure,“ agreed Bell, happy with the suggested arrangement.

„In fact,“ continued Pamela, „why not sleep there permanently?“

„That‘s a good idea,“ accepted Bell.

It was a further week before an opportunity came to set a trap for the remaining two field agents. With hindsight it was easy to find ironic comparisons with the capture of Jack Harding, who, with further ironic coincidence, was sentenced to fifteen years‘ hard labour in an East German jail on the day Bell briefed the two on their mission.

Elizabeth Porter was the other female officer at the Factory. She was a studious, quiet-mannered girl who wore spectacles and plain, sombre-coloured clothes. Her supposedly protective, watching companion was Anthony Marshall, and he was a complete contrast. He dressed flamboyantly and was usually the first to arrive at a party and always the last to leave. He considered himself a great lover and had pursued every female researcher and typist in the department. Bell knew that he had tried—but failed—to seduce Ann.

It was a pick-up, as it had been in East Berlin, only this time in the Czech capital of Prague. And again like East Berlin, it was near a river, from a dead-letter

drop on the cathedral side of the Charles Bridge, the statue-lined, pedestrians-only walkway across the Vistula. Precisely at eight o'clock on the second Monday of the month Elizabeth Porter had to collect from beside a specific gravestone an apparently empty and discarded cigarette packet. It in fact contained a tightly folded photocopy of a Defence Ministry document setting out the troop strength of the Warsaw Pact forces stationed throughout Czechoslovakia.

The collection went without any hitch. It was on the bridge, when the girl was returning to the main part of the city, that the arrest was attempted. Counterespionage agents and police sealed both sides of the bridge, which trapped Elizabeth in the middle, but they did it clumsily, swinging lorries and high-sided vehicles to form a barrier at either end. And she saw them. She halted at once, leaning against the parapet, and dropped the packet and the photocopy into the fast-flowing river, where they were lost for ever.

The police did seize her but without any evidence were unable to make any case. London protested the detention of an innocent schoolteacher, which was Elizabeth's cover, and after three weeks the Czech authorities were forced to release her.

Samuel Bell debriefed her on the day she was repatriated to London, haggard and pale after days of interrogation but otherwise uninjured.

Bell let her talk for a long time before suddenly asking: „Where was Anthony Marshall?"

„He wasn't able to reach the bridge to warn me," said the girl. „The police moved very quickly: actually erected the barrier in front of him." She paused. Then she said: „The bridge was crowded but I was the only one picked out. They were looking just for me. I think it was a tip-off."

„I think so too," agreed the Director General. And now he knew the traitor who had given that tip-off to the Czechs. Apart from himself and the woman sitting before him only one other person had known of the operation: Anthony Marshall.

Bell made his plans quite dispassionately. He was sure that Marshall was responsible for the detection of four valued agents, men who were going to spend the rest of their lives rotting in various communist jails. So Bell felt no pity for the man he had to punish. And he decided that the punishment for a crime for which he could produce no positive evidence before an English court to get a legal verdict had to be long and hard imprisonment, the same as Marshall had inflicted upon his victims.

Bell accepted he could not move against Marshall anywhere within the communist bloc: the man was their agent so to attempt to destroy him there would, in fact, be handing him over to his true masters. For several whisky-aided days and nights Bell puzzled how to achieve what he wanted, determined against any mistake which might let Marshall go unpunished.

When the idea came he first dismissed it, regarding it as too unpredictable. But then he remembered how fanatical the regime was in Iran and changed his mind completely, deciding that because of the fanaticism it was, in fact, entirely predictable.

Bell personally briefed Marshall. On a passport describing himself as a salesman of machine-part spares Marshall was to enter Iran by road, crossing from Hakkari in Turkey, and drive as far as Hamadan. There he was to wait at the

only hotel in the town until he was contacted by a man who in conversation would use the phrase: „The country is going through great change.“ From him Marshall was to learn the true extent of opposition within Iran to the ayatollahs.

The ever-smiling, supremely confident Marshall, brightly dressed in a fawn suit with red tie and pocket handkerchief, said: „This is an unusual one?“

„But important, if we get a hint that the regime in Tehran might be overthrown,“ said the Director General.

The day after personally instructing the man he considered a traitor, Samuel Bell did something else personally. Anonymously he posted to the Iranian legation in London an untraceable note warning that a British businessman claiming to be a machine-parts salesman who was entering the country from Hakkari, on the Hamadan road, was really a British spy.

It was an appalling drive. Marshall flew first to Istanbul and then to Ankara, on an internal flight, but had to drive south-east from then on. The mountain roads were rutted and broken and in places not roads at all, just dirt tracks. Before he reached Hakkari he had two punctures. At the Turkish border town he had the car checked as thoroughly as he could by a doubtful garage, guessing the roads would be as bad when he got into Iran, and allowed himself a much-needed night‘s rest at a smelling, fly-infested hotel.

The border crossing was chaotic, a disordered mass of people, animals, ancient lorries and buses milling across the road, making it almost impossible to drive. Marshall edged forward, not really able to locate a proper queue. The sun throbbed down from a heat-white sky, soaking him in perspiration, the kicked-up dust got in his throat and eyes, and his ears ached from the shouting and the sound of car horns.

It was an hour before he even got near the border post itself, grateful that there was some order at last. Metal barriers funnelled people and vehicles into a line which slowly trickled past the uniformed inspectors. When his turn came at last Marshall handed his documents to a fat, moustached man whose uniform was black-ringed from sweat. The officer intently compared the passport photograph with Marshall himself and then demanded the hire-car documents.

„Businessman?“ the officer queried.

„Yes,“ said Marshall, his cover story prepared. „Machine parts.“

„Going all the way to Tehran?“

„I hope so,“ said Marshall, which was true. After making the Hamadan meeting he was going to drive to the Iranian capital and fly back to London from there to avoid the hell of Turkish mountain roads again: he couldn‘t understand now why he hadn‘t been allowed to come in through Tehran in the first place.

„Wait,“ ordered the inspector, walking back into the customs booth.

Marshall did. The burning heat gave him an excuse constantly to mop his forehead and not appear openly nervous. He forced himself not to look towards the office, to see what checks were being made on his documents.

It seemed a very long time before the fat man returned. He handed everything back to Marshall and said: „OK. Go on.“

Marshall smiled and nodded and put the car in gear, feeling the apprehension lift. Easy, he thought: very easy. The congestion remained just inside the border but quickly, in less than a mile, he cleared the straggled line of people on foot or

travelling with animals and the road opened. It was far better than Marshall had expected and he was able to maintain a fairly high speed. It was only when he overtook a line of slower-moving buses and lorries that he became aware of an army vehicle keeping pace with him and then, when he pulled out again, that it was not just one but two small trucks. Fear jumped through him but not seriously: there were a hundred reasons why they should have been on the same road as himself and be in as much of a hurry. The pursuit was too obvious to be professional and Marshall knew easily enough how to evade it. He saw the pull-in rest stop ahead, signalled and coasted the car to a stop, smiling as the army vehicles carried on by.

After about five minutes he started off again, vaguely irritated that a lot of the slow-moving vehicles he'd overtaken already were ahead of him once more.

Marshall was strained sideways in the car, seeking a break in the oncoming traffic, when the ambush happened. There was a corner around which he couldn't properly see and when he rounded it he saw that the road split and that the army trucks had stopped in a waiting formation. He braked and tried to hide himself in the line but knew from the instant burst of activity by soldiers around the vehicles that he'd been spotted.

Marshall panicked.

He tried at first to evade them by pretending to remain on the wider road, turning sharply at the last moment on to the other highway at the split, but it only delayed them briefly. When they began chasing him both used their sirens and flashing lights, and there were shouts magnified through an electronic megaphone system that Marshall couldn't understand but didn't need to because the only thing they could be telling him to do was stop. But he didn't. He went faster, but the vehicles behind kept up. The road started to break up into a dirt track, which slowed him, but he still took a corner too fast and skidded, the wheel jerking from his hands and the rear of the car sliding sideways. There was a thump where it hit some unseen obstruction, a rock he guessed, and then Marshall felt the car start to sink into soft sand. Blindly, stupidly, he leapt out and began to run, the amplified shouts to stop filling his head. There was a shot. And then another. The third hit him, high in the shoulder, so that he toppled practically in a complete cartwheel, staggering to his feet and stumbling a few more paces before the next bullet caught him in the back, killing him instantly.

„The Foreign Office are making all the protests they can," reported Thurlow. „I've advised them that Marshall was one of ours, of course, so there is a limit to how far they can go."

„There's no chance of the Iranians discovering that, though," said the Director General. „They can claim he was a spy for as long as they like but there isn't the slightest proof."

„What was Marshall doing there?" asked his deputy.

„A mission I assigned him," said Bell. He was shocked by the killing, never imagining that would be the outcome. He'd only ever intended the man to be imprisoned, nothing more.

„Are you going to send in someone else?'

Bell shook his head. „It was a one-chance opportunity," he said. „That chance has gone now. We've lost it." And we've lost a traitor, dreadful though the

circumstances are, thought the Director General. At least the Factory would be safe in the future.

Maurice Birch was a Factory man, a protégé of Bell‘s whose idea it had been to put the man deep within the British embassy in Moscow but keep from all the other Russian-based intelligence personnel and controllers any indication of Birch‘s true function. Birch worked properly as a Second Secretary and took no part whatsoever in the normal intelligence-gathering activities with other agents. Neither did he use any intelligence communication system. His liaison was with Bell direct, through the diplomatic bag. The Director General believed the man‘s cover to be absolutely secure.

It was two months after Marshall‘s death that the KGB seized Maurice Birch. He was arrested on the Prospekt Mira with one of the Factory‘s best Russian informants, who under brutal questioning made a full confession hopelessly incriminating the Englishman.

„It‘ll be a life sentence,“ guessed Thurlow when he and the Director General held a damage assessment meeting.

„Yes,“ accepted Bell. His hangover was particularly bad that morning: he‘d had to postpone the meeting, to be sick.

„I think we have seriously to consider that the leak is internal, coming from this very building,“ insisted the deputy.

He already had, reflected Bell. He had decided upon Marshall‘s guilt and inadvertently sent the man to his death. But that had been two months before. So Marshall could not have been the person who‘d identified Maurice Birch to the Russians.

Which meant two things, accepted Bell. He‘d caused an innocent man to be killed. And the traitor was still at large, somewhere within the Factory: at large and operating. That night, at Ann‘s apartment, Samuel Bell got far drunker than he usually did.