

The Poison Tide

Also by Andrew Williams

FICTION

The Interrogator
To Kill a Tsar

NON-FICTION

The Battle of the Atlantic
D-Day to Berlin

The Poison Tide

ANDREW WILLIAMS

JOHN MURRAY

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For Kate

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.

William Butler Yeats

1914

PROLOGUE

The Patient

THE HOSPITAL TRAIN announced its arrival beneath the smoky vault of the Lehrter Bahnhof with a shriek that set nerves jangling. A column of ambulances was waiting on the platform and to an accompaniment of whistles, the slamming of doors and the barking of the military marshals, the wounded began to step from the train, grey and solemn after many hours in close carriages. Patient faces – the resignation of the helpless – tired faces, some dazed, some distorted by pain, stained and bandaged like the procession at the last trumpet. After four months of war, they were still worthy of comment and the polite applause of civil servants and businessmen on their way to offices in Berlin's government district. Mothers with young children hurried by.

Dr Anton Dilger was used to the suffering of others. He had met a dozen or more hospital trains from the Front. He'd restrained men demented with pain and some had died under his knife. All of these tasks he'd conducted with the necessary professional detachment. But on this freezing December day, Dr Dilger was a spectator, standing among a group of the curious on the platform opposite, gawking with the rest. He was a young man of thirty, clever but restless, inclined more by disposition to action than to thought. To watch, unable to lift a finger, was an exquisite torment and yet the feeling held him there.

A tightness across the chest, fatigue, lethargy, irritability, a lack of concentration, a certain emptiness. His symptoms met a description he'd read in a medical journal of an affliction the British were calling shell shock. But he'd spent no more than a few hours at the battle front as an observer and enjoyed the experience. No, he was ashamed to acknowledge the cause because grief was not a condition he recognised or could treat. The death of his nephew, Peter, had left him with a sense of helplessness – worse – impotence.

Last from the train were the stretchers, the tough cases and the amputees, received by the orderlies with a sharp efficiency that spoke already of great experience. One young man, his head swathed in a turban of bandages, was wearing the great-coat of his nephew's cavalry regiment about his shoulders. Dilger wanted to shout to him but the words stuck in his throat and then the stretcher was gone.

He left the station with the wounded and walked the short distance to the Charité Hospital. Ambulances were idling at its entrance, nurses scurrying through an evil cloud of exhaust fumes like figures in badly cranked and tinted film. For a few uncertain minutes he stood idly by again, gazing up at the hospital's plain brick face. The invitation had arrived just days after he had learnt of Peter's death and he'd given it no consideration. There had been a second invitation, and a third, and finally a telephone call from the director of his own hospital, all but ordering him to come here. Professor Carl Troester was Germany's leading veterinary surgeon. Why would he wish to see a little-known – no, if he was honest, an unknown Red Cross doctor? His director wasn't able to say.

Troester's young assistant greeted him in the entrance hall with a stiff bow and click of his heels that contrived to suggest a rebuke. The professor was expecting him in Infectious Diseases, he remarked haughtily. 'And to save time, Doctor,

I took the liberty of bringing these.' He thrust a coat and mask at Dilger then turned away, intent on quick-marching him to the stairs.

The isolation ward was stiflingly hot and the sickly-sweet smell of putrefaction made Dilger feel nauseous. Life was being squeezed from the patient. An oscillation of ventilation between apnoea and tachypnoea: a pattern he had witnessed a hundred times. Caucasian male, heavily built, approximately forty. Motionless for what seemed an eternity, then with a jerk his body arched as if tugged by invisible strings, gasping for air, fluid rattling in his throat, lips drawn tightly over his teeth.

'Is this a case of glanders?' Dilger asked, turning to the men in coats and masks at his side.

'*Bacillus anthracis*. Anthrax. A foolish mistake.' Professor Carl Troester peered at the patient through thick pince-nez spectacles, his mask puckering as he spoke. 'One of mine. That is to say, he worked for me at the Military Veterinary Academy. Conducting tests . . .'

Ulceration of the upper respiratory tract. Suppurating sores on the torso, blue tinge to the skin, swelling of the glands beneath the patient's arms: a painful and highly infectious contagion. Death was no more than a few hours away.

'Why was it important for me to see this?' enquired Dilger quietly.

The corners of the professor's small dark-blue eyes wrinkled in what may, beneath the mask, have been a smile or a grimace. Leaning forward to grasp a corner of the stained sheet, he dragged it back across the patient. 'There's someone you must meet, Doctor.'

Professor Troester led him from the ward into a scrub room and they dropped their coats and masks in a steel bucket. 'Burn them,' he instructed the orderly. They washed their hands in silence and Dilger's thoughts drifted again from the nameless

patient to his nephew in the noise and filth of battle. Turning for a towel, he caught the professor's eye: 'Is he a casualty?'

The professor tossed his towel into the bucket. 'An accident. Didn't I say so?'

'I've never met a human case.'

'No.'

'My father bred horses . . .'

'Your father was an extraordinary man,' interrupted Troester. He bent into the uniform jacket an orderly was holding to his long back.

'You knew my father?'

'I didn't have the pleasure. Shall we?'

He led Dilger into the corridor, broad like a monastery cloister and restless with the confused echo of military boots, hushed voices, the rattle of hospital trolleys. Half a step in front of him as they turned on to the stairs, the professor-brigadier was tall, parade-ground erect although almost sixty, with a thin leathery face, a distant, academic smile. From the little he had said, his bearing, other small details, it was plain that Troester was a Prussian. On the next landing, they pushed through heavy doors into the administrative wing of the Kaiser Wilhelm Medical Academy – the imperial eagle picked out in tesserae on the wall: a corridor of polished wood and brass nameplates where clerks in crisp olive-grey uniforms had time to acknowledge a superior officer with a salute.

The man Dilger had been brought to meet was standing with his back to the window in the Medical Director's office. The smoke that hung over the desk and the stubs in the ashtray at its edge suggested he'd been waiting a while. Lost at first in silhouette, he came forward to greet them. He was in his fifties with grizzled brown hair, high cheekbones, a large silky cavalry moustache and a general air of quiet authority. He was dressed like any other sober middle-aged servant of the Crown, in frock

coat and striped trousers, but a duelling scar high on his left cheek suggested a colourful history. Troester introduced him as Count Rudolf Nadolny.

‘I’m grateful for your time, Doctor,’ he said with a warm smile, his handshake longer than was customary on first acquaintance. ‘I’m sensible of your loss. Colonel Lamey says you were close to his son . . .’

‘You know the colonel?’

‘We’ve spoken on the telephone.’

‘Peter and I were like brothers, yes . . .’

They stood in respectful silence as if expecting Dilger to say more, but to say more would be to risk saying too much and to say too much would be to lose control.

‘Why do you want to see me, Count?’ he said at last.

‘Has the professor spoken to you of his programme?’

‘That is for you to do,’ interjected Troester. He looked ill at ease.

Nadolny gave him a reassuring, at-your-service smile. ‘Yes, of course. Doctor Dilger, please,’ and he gestured to a table in front of the windows. The Count took the chair opposite, with the dying light of the winter day behind him.

‘I know a good deal about your family, Doctor. Your father – a distinguished soldier on two continents – and both your brothers-in-law are at the Front?’

‘Yes.’

‘You could be of great service to Germany too . . .’

‘I’m doing what I can. A Red Cross hospital . . .’

‘A volunteer surgeon, yes.’ The Count leant over the table, his hands together. Dilger noticed the blood-red intaglio signet ring on his left hand – lest anyone doubt his place in the first rank of society. ‘But there is more important work,’ he continued. ‘Work that will help us to win the war . . .’

‘I’m a doctor.’

‘And a good one, I know. But we have need of soldier-scientists too.’ The Count sat back in his chair again, dragging his fists across the polished mahogany. ‘Forgive me, but before I say more, I must ask for your word as a gentleman that you will not speak of what you hear or have seen at the hospital today.’

‘You mean the patient?’ Dilger glanced at the professor. ‘I was surprised . . . a rare condition.’

‘He was working on our special programme . . . a lesson to us all to be careful, but a clear demonstration of the possibilities too, don’t you agree?’

His question was put with the everyday informality of one proposing guests for a dinner party. It took Dilger a moment to grasp his meaning.

‘Can we be clear?’ he said stiffly. ‘You work for Military Intelligence and you want me to work for you – this *special programme*?’ Nadolny smiled but said nothing, so Dilger continued. ‘I’m sorry, Count, I have no experience, nor do I wish to.’

‘You served in the Balkans – I’ve read your paper on battle-field infections. I’m not a scientist but—’

‘Very fine, very fine,’ Troester cut in. ‘Many valuable insights, and . . .’

‘You see,’ the Count said firmly, raising his hand with its stamp of authority, ‘praise from the professor. You’re a specialist in tissue cultures . . .’

‘There are scores of doctors in the Empire who know more, and I really . . .’ Dilger hesitated. The Count’s sharp little brown eyes didn’t leave his face for a second, turning, turning the signet ring between thumb and forefinger. ‘There are doctors who know more than me,’ he added lamely.

‘Young men like your nephew, Peter, are giving their lives for the Fatherland. It’s important at such times that all of us do what we can.’

‘Yes, yes, but this is a matter of conscience too.’

The professor coughed, removed his pince-nez and began to polish the lenses with his handkerchief. Voices in the outer office filled the silence at the table and, from the street, the distant jangling of an ambulance’s bell.

‘Cigarette? They’re Russian.’ Nadolny reached inside his morning coat. ‘No?’

‘It isn’t very patriotic to smoke Russian tobacco, Count,’ Troester observed with a tense little laugh.

Nadolny ignored him. ‘You must understand, this war is like no other, Doctor,’ he said with quiet emphasis. ‘The choice is either victory or destruction. Victory will be secured by those who prove the fittest – an old struggle but in a new, unforgiving age.’ He paused to draw reflectively on his cigarette. He reminded Dilger of a patient fencer, feinting, parrying, probing for a perfect hit. ‘Germany will win only if each and every one of us dedicates ourselves to victory,’ he resumed. ‘We must bend our thoughts to this task. If necessary, think the unthinkable. Everyone is a combatant. Everyone. But we bring different skills. Perhaps there are better scientists in the Empire, better doctors than you, but this is your duty . . .’

‘I’m clear about my duty, Count. It is to heal.’

‘Your duty, Doctor, is to the Fatherland, your family – to Peter.’ There was a new firmness in Nadolny’s voice. ‘There is no one better suited to this task.’

‘I don’t understand – there are others . . .’ He was angry at the Count’s presumption. ‘Why is it *my* duty? Why me?’

They let him go with a promise that he would speak with them again. His sister’s house in Charlottenburg was dark but for the candle of remembrance burning at a first-floor window. Something wet touched his face as he was collecting himself on the step. The first snow of winter. Lazy flakes were falling

on his clothing, expiring in the dark wool, from something into nothing. Christmas Eve tomorrow.

The colonel's old batman answered the door, took Dilger's hat and coat and, with bowed head, informed him that the mistress had retired to her chamber. Colonel Lamey was still at the Front. A stuttering fire in the drawing room had barely taken the edge off the chill. The burgundy curtains were closed and had been for days, the room harshly lit by new electric wall sconces. In Dilger's absence, his sister had stopped the large mantel clock. The silence was complete. Through the prism of grief the house was taking on a subtle new aspect, sad memories clinging to familiar objects like a film of dust. A few months before, his nephew Peter had perched on the couch by the fire with a glass of champagne.

'A toast to victory!' the colonel had said, his hand on his son's shoulder. Cheers for the young soldier, good-humoured teasing, tears on the cheeks of his mother, Elizabeth.

The parcel with Peter's personal effects was lying on an occasional table between the windows. Elizabeth was refusing to touch it. With small, light steps lest he make a noise that she would deem in the madness of grief to be disrespectful, he walked to the table, picked up the parcel and tore it open. Peter's service revolver, a pipe and tobacco pouch, some leather gloves, his green silk scarf – a present from his mother – and some mud-stained letters and photographs. One of the photographs had been taken on the farm of Dilger's father in Virginia. Peter had an arm about Anton's shoulders, his head thrown back in laughter. Like brothers. Dilger's gaze drifted to the pier glass above the table. They had the same high forehead and long face, and the strong Dilger jaw with the curious dimple in the chin. He picked up Peter's scarf and pressed it to his face. There was still a trace of his sister's perfume. What would my father, the old cavalryman, have thought? he wondered. He

would have been proud of his grandson, Peter. What would he have wished of his son? The course Dilger had plotted to this point in his life had been easy. But his family's grief, this Count – Nadolny – he had been snatched up in the confusing current of the times, inclination, duty, conscience pulling him to different shores.

'Anton, what are you doing?'

His sister Elizabeth was watching him from the door.

'Thinking of Father. I opened this . . .' and he showed her the scarf. She looked at him, wide eyes ringed with shadow, then turned her face to the side and he could see that she was on the point of breaking. He moved quickly to her and held her shaking shoulder and she took the scarf from him. 'Anton, what will become of me . . . how can I . . . oh God, why . . .'

As she sobbed against his chest he asked himself again: 'Why me?' But he knew the answer: 'Because you are an American.' The Count had slipped from German to speak the words very precisely in English, leaning forward with his gaze fixed on Dilger's face, elbow on the table, right hand balled in a fist. 'You are a German and American doctor, but we need you to be an American.'

1915

London

A SPLINTER OF WINTER sun was forcing its way through the curtains on to the wall at an angle that suggested to Wolff he should rouse himself at once.

‘Are you awake, Mrs Curtis?’

Drunk, in a hurry, they’d fallen apart with no thought to the morning. Violet’s face was lost behind a tousled curtain of hair. There was lipstick on the sheet she had pulled to her chin and she’d chipped her nail varnish. Wolff reached a cold hand to her breast, then thought better of waking her. A shave, a shallow tepid bath, sweeping back his dark-brown hair, a splash of discreet cologne. From his dressing-room wardrobe, a black wool suit, stiff white collar and dark-blue tie. Before the mirror, for the world to see in time, a businessman of means in his late thirties, who, to judge by his dark eyes, was burning too much midnight oil. Slipping on his coat, he was searching for his hat when Violet called to him: ‘You *are* taking me to dinner, Sebastian darling, aren’t you?’

‘I’ll try.’ Wolff wasn’t sure what he would want to do by the evening.

The cab dropped him in Trafalgar Square. He walked briskly into Northumberland Avenue and at the corner with Great Scotland Yard he stopped to light a cigarette, turning to face the way he’d come as if sheltering the guttering flame. Satisfied,

he walked on into Whitehall Court. Number 2 was an eight-storey apartment block in the French renaissance style, directly behind the War Office and next to the National Liberal Club. An MP had financed the building with money swindled from those he had described on election day as ordinary hard-working families. Thousands had been left penniless to provide a brash home at the heart of government for civil servants and wealthy businessmen. Its façade of Portland stone and pitched green slate towered over the Embankment, drawing the eye of commuters crossing the river into Charing Cross Station.

In its polished hall the porter slid a register and pen across the desk to Wolff without comment.

‘You’re new.’

‘Three months, sir.’

Wolff pushed it back unsigned: ‘I’m visiting Captain Spencer. I know my way.’

The captain’s private lift was little more than the width of a man’s broad shoulders. The grille slid into place with a rattle and clunk that always reminded Wolff of earth falling on a coffin lid. Apartment 45 was a maze of passages and oddly shaped rooms beneath the eaves of the Court, so difficult to find from the stairway that few residents had any inkling it was there. Its occupant, a short, thickset naval officer, was occasionally seen crossing the entrance hall with companions or walking in the direction of Whitehall. Neighbours who tried to engage him in conversation received no more than the time of day. Only a man with a perfect understanding of the deep reserve of upper-middle-class London and its slavish attachment to the proprieties would have had the temerity to hide the Bureau in genteel Whitehall Court.

‘He’s waiting for you, Lieutenant Wolff.’ The captain’s secretary stepped away from the door to let him enter. ‘You’re late. I telephoned your apartment . . .’ A censorious frown was

hovering between Miss Groves' finely plucked eyebrows. 'And I spoke to your . . . *friend*.' The word fell to its 'end' as if Miss Groves had pushed it from the Tarpeian for sexual impropriety. The captain's nice 'gels' cared a great deal about such things.

The naval gentleman whom the other denizens of the Court called 'Spencer' – Captain Mansfield Cumming – was leaning heavily on sticks in his outer office. 'Where the hell have you been?' He glared at Wolff through his gold-rimmed monocle. 'You're still a naval officer, you know? My office in five minutes.' He turned too smartly and one of his sticks locked beneath a chair.

'Damn it!'

Wolff stepped forward to help. 'No, damn it, man, I can manage,' he said, jerking it free. 'And bring us some coffee, Miss Groves. Lieutenant Wolff looks as if he could do with some.'

He stomped slowly towards his office, hunched like a grizzly bear.

'He's doing very well,' whispered Miss Groves reverentially. Pinned in the wreckage of a car, it was rumoured he had hacked off his own foot with a penknife in order to crawl to his dying son. 'It's only been three months. Flinty, isn't he?'

'He loves his work.'

The captain was breathing heavily when Wolff entered, his face a little sallow, elbows resting on a copy of *The Times*. With a curt nod he indicated the chair on the opposite side of his desk. It was a large airy office, simply decorated with naval charts and a picture of French villagers before a Prussian firing squad. He had placed some of the mechanical gadgets he enjoyed tinkering with at idle moments on a table beneath the window. The largest piece of furniture in the room was a huge steel Dartmouth-green safe where he kept his 'eyes only' files. Two of these were on the desk in front of Wolff.

‘Have you seen this?’ Cumming tapped the newspaper with his forefinger. ‘For some extraordinary reason, they launched their first air raid on your part of the world. Killed a boy in King’s Lynn.’

‘Yes, my mother thought she heard the Zeppelin; it passed over her farm.’

‘Quite a coincidence – I mean, after your visit to the factory at Friedrichshafen. That was a fine piece of work.’

Wolff didn’t reply.

‘No one took the damn things seriously until they read your report,’ Cumming continued. ‘The PS at the War Office reminded me of that the other day; wanted to know how you’d managed it. Told him to mind his own bloody business.’

Get to the point, for goodness’ sake, thought Wolff. He’d been one of C’s scallywags for almost as long as there’d been a Bureau, so they could dispense with the customary overture. The captain didn’t play it well anyway, too soapy, too obvious.

‘It was the reason I was able to get you back from Turkey, of course. That was a bad business.’ Cumming shook his head sympathetically. ‘But it’s been a while now, hasn’t it? Nine months?’

‘Something like that.’

‘Do you think you’re ready now?’

‘Ready for what, sir?’

‘It’s the Irish, you see. Or should I say the Irish problem . . .’ He was interrupted by a knock at the door and Miss Groves entered with the tray. They sat in silence as she poured the coffee, Cumming polishing his monocle with a handkerchief. It was his favourite prop. It made him look villainous, like a spymaster in a shilling shocker. Without it he was the sort of stout, elderly military gentleman you passed in the street without a second glance: mid fifties, with thin white hair, a Punch-like chin, a small mouth and keen grey eyes. They had

liked and respected each other once. Cumming had described him as 'a born spy' and he'd meant it as a compliment. There'd been disagreements, difficult times, but Wolff had trusted him in almost all things. In rather too much, as it turned out. Manipulative and as unscrupulous as Genghis Khan, he had reflected in the leisure of his Turkish prison cell, unfettered by personal loyalty, just as he was required to be by the custom and professional practice of his role. The door closed behind Miss Groves.

'What do you know about Roger Casement?'

Wolff shrugged. 'No more than I read in the papers. Champion of native rights in Africa and elsewhere, celebrated servant of the Crown turned Irish rebel—'

'Traitor,' interrupted Cumming. 'He was in America, now he's in Germany. Gave our fellows the slip. New papers, new face – he shaved his beard . . .' He reached for his cup, cradling it in large calloused sailor's hands. 'There's no doubt about what he wants, of course. Guns and men. Force Irish independence at the point of a German bayonet, and succeed or fail, they know that civil unrest at home would draw men from the fighting in France . . .'

' . . . and set a poor example to the rest of the Empire?'

C put down his cup deliberately. 'Do you believe that, or is it the cynicism you effect as one of your clever disguises?'

'Merely an observation, sir.'

'Do you have views on Ireland?'

'I'm not very interested in politics.'

He nodded approvingly. 'It's enough to be a patriot. We're at war.'

'As you say, sir.'

'Which is why I hope you'll agree to my proposition.'

'You haven't made one yet, sir.'

'Haven't I? No, well I know it won't be easy but we need to

know what he's doing in Berlin, you see. Need someone in his circle.' He peered at Wolff intently through his monocle as if hoping to force instant acquiescence.

Wolff returned his gaze with a stony face. *He wants me to go to Germany.* Lifting his cup slowly, he examined then swirled the dregs of his coffee before returning it to the saucer. Really too bitter a blend for his taste.

'Different from your last assignment, of course,' C remarked, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. 'You know Germany. It's your patch.'

'We shoot their spies now, don't we? And they shoot ours.'

'Everything's tighter in war, you know that.'

'Will you explain that to my widow?'

'Isn't she somebody else's wife?' C enquired tartly.

'Have you been spying on me?'

Cumming dismissed the question with a wave of the hand. 'Won't be easy, I know,' he repeated, with a little less sympathy, 'but no one has your experience of operating in Germany. I still trust you to do a good job.'

'Should I be grateful for your trust? What about Landau or Bywater?'

'You're a spy, Wolff. This is what you're supposed to do. Are you refusing to consider it?'

Am I? Wolff wondered. *Did he have a choice?* The room seemed darker suddenly. He turned his head a little to gaze out of the window. It was a miserable grey January day, miserable. Drops of rain were beginning to trickle down the pane. Sooty London rain. 'No, I'm not refusing. I'll consider it,' he said flatly.

'It's all we have on Casement.' Cumming leant across the desk to push the 'eyes only' files closer. 'Use the scallywags' room. Speak to Miss Groves if you need anything else. Two days is enough. We'll meet again on Thursday. But not here – the Clapham safe house. Will you be awake by ten?'

Wolff picked up the files, and rose quickly from his chair. He was almost at the door when Cumming spoke again: 'Perhaps you've no longer the stomach for this sort of work.' His voice was harder. There was a steely glint in his eye, the old pugilist preparing to lead with his remarkable chin. 'I could order you to go.'

'I thought it was a proposition?'

'You're not the only one, you know,' and he lifted *The Times* and shook it at Wolff. 'Don't you read the casualty list? These fellows are only just out of short trousers.' He glanced away, thin lips white with righteous anger. 'The thing is, your country bloody well needs you, Wolff, they need you – don't forget it.'

Bugger Kitchener. Wolff knew he had earned the right to say so. He'd thought nothing of his own safety when he'd accepted his first assignment – nor had anyone else. He'd learnt a lot in ten years.

He was a tall man with the lean, muscular physique of a distance runner. As a boy, he had run in his grandfather's fields, and as a youth, along fenland dykes to the sea, before him always a seamless Lincolnshire sky. At Cambridge, he'd won a blue; as an officer cadet he'd represented the Navy and earned grudging respect from those who didn't consider a grammar-school engineer a proper gentleman. Wolff drank too much, he smoked too much, but he was still in good condition. He wore his suits well and took trouble with his appearance, a practical man but not without vanity. Clean shaven, with the Dutch face of his father's people, women judged him handsome and often mistook him for younger than his thirty-seven years. Something in his demeanour suggested he had seen a good deal of the world and he was often taken for a 'foreigner'; it was an impression he'd found it useful to cultivate.

He read the Casement files carefully, making notes in his own shorthand as an aide-memoire. After lunch, he spent an hour sheltering from the rain in a bookshop on the Charing Cross Road and bought a handsome edition of Conan Doyle's *The Poison Belt*. In Trafalgar Square, a recruiting officer and his sergeants were shouting 'Duty' and 'Honour' at passers-by.

A month before, there had been no need for raised voices; the crowd was five deep at the base of the Column. Now the rush to glory was over. He walked on into St James's Park, the bare branches drip-dripping on his hat and overcoat, a mist thickening to a late-afternoon pea-souper. Somewhere on the still lake a duck struggled to take flight and from the direction of the Palace, the dreary echo of a regimental band playing an imperial favourite. At the bridge Wolff stopped and leant on the wet rail to consider C's 'proposition', but poisonous memories kept looming in and out of his mind like people passing in the fog.

He had resolved to finish with the Bureau. He'd spent almost a year in the Sultan's special prison in Istanbul contemplating an escape to something better, a return perhaps to the submarine service he had helped to pioneer. But by the time the Foreign Office had decided it was worthwhile negotiating his release he'd recognised the impossibility of settling to his old life again. Then the Kaiser had put paid to other possibilities by marching his armies into Belgium. Wolff ran his forefinger along the rail of the bridge, impatiently stroking raindrops into the lake. 'Honour', 'duty', 'sacrifice' were on everyone's lips these days. He'd been doing his bit for ten years. He'd made sacrifices. Violet liked to trace some of them on his skin.

Wolff turned and crossed the bridge, strolling back along the lake towards Whitehall. Bowler-hatted civil servants hurried past on the way to Victoria Station and their tidy homes in the

suburbs. The lights in the Foreign Secretary's office were still burning brightly even if they'd gone out in the rest of Europe. Wolff wondered if he'd taken tea there with Casement and listened to his tales of Africa and South America. Casement had been a hero for the new century. Proof in person of Great Britain's civilising influence on the rest of the world. Knighted by his king, as conquerors were before him, but for his work on behalf of Negroes and Indians. Whitehall didn't hold Wolff in very high regard and his work was not of the civilising sort. He didn't give a fig for the Foreign Secretary's good opinion but the irony of being asked to spy upon a man who'd received so much of his approbation made him smile.

Crossing Horse Guards Road, he walked briskly on up the steps into Downing Street. A group of senior army officers was adjusting hats and sticks on the pavement outside Number 10. He followed them into Whitehall and stood beneath the street-lamp in front of the Foreign Office in the hope of attracting the attention of a passing cab. Parliament was lost in the fog and he could only distinguish a muddy halo of office windows on the opposite side of Whitehall. Am I to risk my life in Germany because Casement has so thoroughly disappointed them all? he wondered. 'Here.' The taxi wheezed to the kerb a few yards beyond him. 'Take me to Devonshire Place.'

The trouble with Sir Roger Casement, he reflected as he swung on to the taxi's seat, is that he's no longer the conscience of the Empire but a challenge to its existence.

Mrs Violet Curtis had invited her younger brother and two of his friends to join them for dinner at Rules. A striking figure in pale lavender satin, daringly décolleté, she moved with a graceful swing of the hips that drew the gaze of the gentlemen in the restaurant. There was something carnal in her obvious wish to please.

'You're lucky, you know,' she'd told Wolff a few weeks into their affair. 'My friends can't understand what I see in you.'

He was fifteen years her senior and only a year younger than her husband.

'Why don't you say you love me?' she often asked him.

But she wanted him because he refused to and trusted him because he never spoke of the future. When Major Reggie Curtis returned from Belgium she would be waiting to fall into his arms.

Wolff sensed, even before the waiter dropped a napkin into his lap, that it was going to be an unpleasant evening. Violet had taken the seat opposite him and was bubbling noisily, drawing more hungry looks from the gentlemen at adjoining tables. Violet's brother and his friends were in uniform and conversation turned to the war before they'd finished with the menu.

'Do you think they'll bomb London?' they wanted to know.

'Sebastian's mother heard a Zeppelin, didn't she, darling?'

'They killed a fourteen-year-old boy. You see – that's what we're fighting against.'

'They say the war won't last more than another six months . . .'

'Long enough for us to get out there, I hope.'

They talked like rugby-club hearties before a game. It put Wolff in a bad humour. Violet frowned at him as if to say, 'Buck up, why don't you?' She was an astute judge of men's moods and she'd seen him like this before. She smiled and sometimes she giggled but there were anxious little lines on her brow as if she also sensed that the evening would end badly.

He was a portly junior officer with the sort of sly moustache the war had made fashionable. He had been staring at Violet from the moment she'd entered the restaurant but it had taken time and wine for him to find the courage to approach her. Out

of the corner of his eye, Wolff watched the man make excuses to his party, rise from his chair and walk unsteadily towards their table. His fleshy face was the colour of a Weissherbst rosé and he was perspiring profusely. Violet was too caught up in her own story to notice him at her shoulder, even when he'd secured the attention of her audience. He cleared his throat nervously and then again with more determination.

'Oh, hello,' she half turned to look up at him.

'Mrs Curtis? My name's Barrett. I have the honour of serving with Major Curtis.'

'Oh? How wonderful.' She blushed and her tiny hands began to wrestle with a napkin. 'Did you hear that, everyone? Join us, Lieutenant, please,' and she tried to summon a waiter for a chair.

'No. Thank you. No, Mrs Curtis.' The lieutenant took a deep shaky breath. He was preparing to step off his precipice.

Violet must have sensed it too because she began to chatter like a small child before an angry parent. 'When did you last see him? My husband, I mean. It's been so long . . .' Her right hand strayed to her lip. 'This is my brother, Adam . . .'

'Out of respect for your husband, I must say, your behaviour, well, he deserves better,' Barrett stammered.

Violet's face began to crumple.

'It isn't my place—' he continued.

'You're right. It isn't,' interrupted Wolff. 'Your place is over there.' He nodded to the lieutenant's table. 'I suggest you rejoin your companions at once.'

Barrett's jaw dropped like a marionette's at rest. 'Who the devil—' he said at last. 'Who the devil are you, sir? My business—'

'Sit down before you make a fool of yourself, why don't you?'

'Please, Sebastian.' Violet gave him a desperate look. Her eyes were shining with tears. 'Please, let him just say what he wants to say and go.'

‘Are you the fellow?’ Barrett’s dander was up, flushed with wine and a righteous resolve to have it out, his right hand in a fist at his side. ‘What are you smiling at? Not in uniform, I see,’ and he snapped his fingers theatrically in front of Wolff’s face.

‘Look, steady, old chap . . .’ This from Violet’s brother. He had dumped his napkin on the table and was rising. Wolff was conscious of a hush in the restaurant, broken only by the tinkle of knives and forks on china and the mumble of waiters serving the tables. The manager was moving swiftly towards them.

‘Leave now, Lieutenant,’ said Wolff quietly. But Barrett wasn’t going to surrender an inch of polished floor to someone in white tie and tails. ‘What is your name, sir?’ he demanded loudly. ‘It is my intention to write to Major Curtis . . .’

‘Please, sir.’ The manager touched Barrett’s elbow and he began to turn towards him. ‘I must ask—’

But his words were drowned by a clatter of plates.

‘No, Sebastian,’ Violet squealed.

It was too late. Wolff was on his feet and lunging for the lieutenant’s wrist. Grasping it in his left hand, he thrust at Barrett’s head with his right, as if trying to jerk it from his shoulders. The lieutenant whimpered with pain and bent double as Wolff twisted his arm and locked it at right angles to his body, the pressure on the elbow. Then, with a deft turn, Wolff forced Barrett’s arm behind his back, pulling him upright by the collar. No one had moved. There had been no time to cry out in protest. It was over in the blink of an eye, accomplished with a sleight of hand worthy of Houdini the handcuff king.

Violet buried her face in a lace handkerchief. Her brother was still hovering over the table with an expression of complete astonishment on his face. Wolff caught his eye. ‘Settle our bill, will you?’

‘Let me go at once, do you hear.’ Barrett had found his voice.

There was a rumble of disapproval as the restaurant began to stir at last.

‘Really, I say,’ one man shouted.

‘This is Rules,’ ventured another. ‘Let the fellow go.’

Wolff didn’t reply. Eyes front, he frog-marched Barrett across the floor, weaving between tables with the rough confidence of an East End landlord at closing time. Manager and waiters fussed about him, a young army officer made a half-hearted attempt to block his way – Wolff brushed him aside – but no one was willing to lift a finger to prevent him reaching the door.

Rain was beating on the restaurant’s awning, gusting down Maiden Lane and chasing couples on their way home from the theatre into the shelter of shopfronts. Within seconds Wolff’s trousers were clinging to his legs. A passing car sloshed into the gutter and a sheet of dirty water swept across the pavement on to Lieutenant Barrett’s perfectly polished boots. The button had come off one of his shoulder boards and it was flapping like a broken wing.

‘Let me go, do you hear?’ He was almost weeping. ‘You haven’t heard the last of this, you coward.’

Wolff twisted his arm tighter until he gasped with pain. It would be a simple thing to break it, Wolff thought, and for a moment he wanted to. Why shouldn’t Barrett be made to pay?

‘Let him go,’ screamed Violet, and she tugged at his arm. ‘For God’s sake, are you mad?’

‘How could you?’ she asked Wolff repeatedly. She cried and shouted – he had humiliated her in front of ‘everyone’ – but she refused to go home with her brother. She sat in smouldering silence in the taxicab to his apartment, and fell on him with her tiny fists as soon as he had closed the door, biting, scratching, then kissing – the desperate passion of those who wish to

forget. Later, in crumpled sheets, her small round face pressed in sleep to his shoulder, he wondered if it was the darkness she'd glimpsed in him at the restaurant that had aroused her so.

He'd had many affairs. Short, intense, unrestrained and blinding for a time. He had told two women that he loved them but when it was over he couldn't be sure. He cared for his mother. The thought made him smile: the spy and his mother. His father had died when he was five and his mother and paternal grandfather had brought him up, a little foreign boy, an only child in a lonely place – always running.

Violet stirred beside him and he craned forward to kiss her hair. It was damp with perspiration and smelt of her perfume and their sex. He traced the graceful curves of her body beneath the sheet with his fingertips. Would it be different if they were in love? He was sorry he'd upset her at the restaurant. He had wanted to protect her from scandal but all he'd succeeded in doing was inviting more. One day soon the post would travel up the line and there would be a letter for Major Curtis.

'Letter for Major Curtis.'

Wolff could see him there, knee deep in Flanders mud, preparing to lead a raiding party, or in a funk hole under shell-fire. There'd be a big smile on his face – there was always a smile on Reggie Curtis's face. He'd tear the letter open with a dirty fingernail.

I feel it my duty to inform you, Sir, that your wife is fucking your old Cambridge chum, Sebastian Wolff. Yours respectfully, et cetera, et cetera.

Overcome with grief, he would lead a suicidal charge into no-man's-land and be blown to small pieces by a Jack Johnson. Reggie could be the most obliging of fellows.

Wolff shuffled down the bed until his face was close to

Violet's, then leant forward to kiss her lightly on the lips. She smiled but didn't open her eyes, and he felt a surge of tenderness for her. 'Shameless hussy, I'll miss you.' He'd drunk deeply of her, intoxicated by her beguiling smile, the scent of her and the way she seemed to glide through life with effortless grace – those things and more. But it wasn't enough. It was an illusion. He leant forward to kiss Violet again. He would go to Germany and, for as long as he could stay alive, he'd pretend to be someone else, someone who hadn't broken and screamed in agony and begged them to stop. Wasn't that his patriotic duty? Didn't he owe his country that much? C had blown his whistle and he would go over the top with the rest.