

COMING UP ROSES?

KC ABBOTT

Bertie Greenwood was a spy.

If he were not the quintessential English gentleman, his colleagues in the Foreign Office might have suspected something but, as it was, no one dreamed he could be a traitor. He had been to the right kind of school, he spoke with the right accent and he certainly looked the part. He had travelled extensively in Europe, of course, including Germany, but so had every English gentleman of taste and education. After all, the Kaiser was the old Queen's grandson; England and Germany were two sides of the same coin. Greenwood had worked in the Foreign Office for over twelve years and if, in that time, Great Britain's relationship with mighty Germany had changed somewhat, the Foreign Office's attitude to its staff most certainly had not: Greenwood was a Foreign Office official and an English gentleman – his loyalty was therefore beyond question.

It was an ordinary Friday morning. Greenwood was early – few of his colleagues ever arrived before ten – and the messenger had not yet finished making up the tiny fire which could not keep the room warm, even in June. Greenwood hung his bowler and umbrella on the regulation hat stand and absently stroked his neat moustache as he glanced round the office. The cream and brown paint would have been shiny if it had been clean, but the worn wooden furniture would never shine again. The drab neglect – so predictably British – was enlivened only by the bright collection of picture postcards arranged on the notice board behind Greenwood's chair.

Greenwood placed his briefcase carefully on his desk with the *Edward VII* monogram uppermost. His years of service had earned him the status that the *Eviir* mark bestowed. To those who understood such things, it proved that he was an official of some standing, in spite of his relatively junior rank. The ultimate sign of status – passed on only to the most senior men – was a battered *VR* briefcase, but, given his obscure family background, Greenwood would never rise high enough to be given one of those.

'There we are,' said the messenger, rising from his knees and trying to brush the coal dust off his hands. 'That's drawing nicely. Shall I tell Bates to bring in your tea now, sir? I don't reckon the post will be up for quite a while yet.'

'Thank you. That will do very well,' Greenwood replied coldly.

By the time his clerk arrived with the blue Spode cup and saucer, Greenwood was surrounded by buff-coloured files, mostly labelled *Balkans*, and had covered more than half a page of foolscap with his elegant handwriting. Bates placed the tea on the desk and picked up the contents of the out-tray. There was a file requisition slip on the top. 'Do you need these now, sir? Or can it wait until I've sorted the post? There's only me and one

messenger on this morning, sir, and it takes quite a while for me to get files out of the confidential registry.'

Greenwood looked up then, his expression bland. It would not do to seem too eager. 'Do it when you can, Bates. I've got plenty to be going on with,' he added lightly, gesturing towards the files in the pending tray. 'No doubt there will be plenty more in the post today, if the bags have arrived at last.'

'Looks like it, judging by the size of the sack that just arrived,' said Bates. 'Can't understand why they were held up anyway,' he continued, warming to his theme. 'It's the middle of summer, after all, and the Channel couldn't have been that bad.'

Greenwood pointedly turned his attention back to his draft. Once the clerk started chatting to his 'gentlemen', nothing short of an earthquake would shift him. Other officials encouraged the FO's old retainers to gossip, but Greenwood did not. Such people were of no use to him, or to the Germans. Little people should be kept in their place.

The clerk stood for a moment, but Greenwood had already started writing again. After a few seconds of silence, Bates turned and left, with a muffled grunt of disgust.

Almost immediately, the door opened again. Greenwood schooled his features to hide his irritation. He had never liked the civil service code that officials should not knock before entering an office. It was supposed to be a sign of equality, as was the fact that everyone was addressed by his surname, but it was all a sham. Birth still mattered far more than ability. Every official knew precisely where he fitted into the rigid pecking order of the Office; it was sheer hypocrisy to pretend otherwise. In Germany, things were different. In Germany, Greenwood was properly valued.

'Mornin', Greenwood,' said Ashburton, tossing his bowler at the hat stand. It missed. He looked rather pink as he retrieved it from the floor and hung it beside Greenwood's. Then he put his briefcase behind his desk where no one could see it. It was embarrassingly stiff and shiny; and the monogram was that of the new king – merely *GvR*. 'You must have arrived early, old man,' Ashburton said, surveying the heaps of files and the lengthy handwritten draft. 'Not a flap on, is there?'

Greenwood gritted his teeth. Ashburton was almost as useless as Bates, but Ashburton had a starry career ahead of him. What's more, he had every right to be in their shared office. 'No,' Greenwood said curtly, barely lifting his head, 'not for us. Nothing short of a war would distract Ministers from Irish home rule at the moment. I need to get this submission finished. I'm duty clerk this weekend, remember.'

Obviously, Ashburton had forgotten. Not surprising, perhaps, since he was still too junior and too inexperienced for the role. The duty clerk was the first port of call at night and weekends and had to be able to deal with any emergency, from any part of the world, not just his own particular area of expertise. As a long-serving but unmarried man, Greenwood was ideally placed to be duty clerk: the awkward hours inconvenienced nobody and the extra money was very welcome. Of course, it also allowed him access to material he would not

ordinarily see, some of it highly classified. He allowed himself a tight little smile and stroked his moustache. All in all, it was a very satisfactory arrangement.

Bates came in with another cup of tea. The saucer was chipped but Ashburton did not seem to mind. 'Thank you, Bates,' he said cheerfully. 'Just the job. Have you managed to dig out those files I asked for?'

'Around ten minutes ago, sir. I can bring them round in a tick, if you need them.'

Ashburton grinned engagingly at the clerk. 'No, I'm not in that much of a hurry. Once I've drunk my tea...' He was already spreading out his *Times* on the desk.

As Greenwood neared the end of his first page, Ashburton strolled across to stand behind him, reading over his shoulder. Greenwood tensed. Nothing was more annoying.

'Oh, the Archduke's visit, again,' said Ashburton dismissively, returning to his desk. 'My uncle says it's a waste of time. The Austrians will never be trusted there, no matter how many Royals they send.'

Greenwood particularly detested the way Ashburton referred to the Permanent Under-Secretary, always underlining the closeness of their relationship. If the boy had an ounce of common sense, he would call his uncle 'the PUS', as everyone else did.

Greenwood had barely started his second page when Bates came back. The clerk should have been bringing piles of files, but he had only one item in his hand – a postcard.

'Thought you'd like this immediately, Mr Greenwood,' said Bates, turning it over in his hand and casually reading the back. 'From Mr Fleming in Vienna, I think, though the writing's pretty difficult to read.'

'Thank you, Bates,' said Greenwood, stretching out his hand imperiously.

Bates surrendered the card somewhat reluctantly, as if he felt he had a right to finish reading it. 'Interesting picture, that,' he said. 'Some kind of saint, in't she?'

Ashburton was coming over to look, too, so Greenwood had no choice but to give in gracefully. There was no risk involved with this one. 'Saint Elizabeth of Hungary,' he said. He turned the picture over to check her dates. 'Early thirteenth century. According to legend,' he went on, rapidly translating the German printed on the back of the card, 'her husband forbade her to give charity to the poor. One day, he caught her carrying an apron full of bread out of the castle. "What have you there?" he demanded. "Roses, my lord," she replied. And lo, when she opened her apron, it was full of roses.' Greenwood snorted. So very primitive. 'They said it was a miracle, of course.'

'Jolly conveniently timed, as miracles go,' murmured Ashburton with a slight smirk, returning to his desk.

'That would be how she got to be a saint, I suppose,' said Bates, nodding.

Greenwood turned away to pin the card on his board.

Bates was not about to take the hint. 'Wonderful collection of cards you've got, sir, if you don't mind me saying so. All them places. I fancy you get cards from most of the Posts in Europe, now that so many gentlemen know about your collection.'

Faced with questions about one of the riskier aspects of his spying work, Greenwood had to tread very carefully. Some of the postcards so ostentatiously displayed on the wall – but not the one just in from Vienna – included coded messages, though only the most stringent examination would identify them. 'You are probably right, Bates.' He forced a thin smile. 'So much so, in fact, that I shall have to take some of these home soon to make room.'

'I could take them down for you, sir.'

Too risky! Time for a change of subject. 'How much longer for the post, Bates?'

'It'll be along in five minutes, sir. Just the last bag to go through.' He hurried out.

'He might have seen to the fire,' Ashburton said, looking up from his newspaper. 'Don't worry. I'll do it.' He slid some more coal into the tiny grate. The fire immediately started to smoke slightly, so he had to apply the poker. He knew how to tend a fire, at least. It had probably been beaten into him at Eton by some other buffoon with a pedigree going back to the Normans.

Ten minutes elapsed, with no sign of Bates or the post. Ashburton closed his newspaper with a sigh and got up. 'If you don't mind, old chap,' he began, 'I'll take an early lunch, since the post doesn't seem to be arriving. Then I can really get down to things when I get back.' He was the PUS's nephew. He knew Greenwood could not raise any objection.

On this occasion, Greenwood was delighted to see him go, since his absence would allow Greenwood to go through all the new files as soon as they arrived. He could even photograph some of them, if he were quick. He glanced across at the locked cabinet where his equipment was hidden, then changed his mind. No. Not now. It would be safer to do any copying in the duty clerk's flat, after everyone else had gone home.

Eventually, Bates's laden trolley pushed open the door, followed by the man himself, apologising before he had even entered the room. 'Sorry to keep you waiting, sir. There was a load of special stuff in the last bag and I had to go down to the classified registry to get the right files. But I got all the others you wanted, while I was there.' He placed a pile of green and buff files in Greenwood's in-tray. Then he placed two pink files carefully on top. 'You'll have to sign for them, sir,' he said, handing over the security record.

Greenwood signed with a flourish.

'I'll be in the registry, sir, if you want to return the files while you go to lunch.'

'Thank you, Bates, but Mr Ashburton will be back before I need to go out.'

The moment the door closed, Greenwood reached for the first of the secret files. Two new documents had been added: a telegram sent the previous day about the risks attached to the Archduke's visit, and a report on the activities of the *Black Hand* secret

society in Serbia. The problems with the diplomatic bags had delayed the *Black Hand* report by several days; it was probably now too late to be useful.

He found he was wrong. The report turned out to be full of vital detail, including names and locations. His German masters would want it all, and urgently. He would have to photograph it and – somehow – get it to them within hours. The telegram was less of a problem. He could copy out the salient facts by hand and include them with the photographs.

It was not yet noon. He still had time. He went to the window and pushed the shabby curtains back as far as they would go, leaving his body silhouetted in the form of a cross for several seconds. To the German spy strolling along Horse Guards, it signalled that urgent material would be left in a pre-arranged location before the day was out.

Having promised it, Greenwood now had to deliver. He had never failed yet but, on this occasion, it was going to be very difficult. Once his weekend stint as duty clerk had begun, he was not allowed to leave the building. So he had only an hour or two to get the material out. He would have to take the photographs here, in spite of the risks.

He looked longingly at the lock on the office door but he did not dare to use it while he was known to be inside. Better to get rid of anyone who might have reason to come in. He quickly wrote up some file requisitions and summoned his clerk to fetch them from the classified registry downstairs.

'I'd have to lock up the registry to go down,' protested Bates. 'If you could wait—'

'I need these files now, Bates,' said Greenwood sharply. 'It won't matter if our registry is locked up for a few minutes.' As Bates left, grumbling, Greenwood moved smoothly into action. He was good at this. Control and efficiency were his watchwords. First, he checked that there was nothing in the second secret file worth copying, then he set his equipment up on his desk, checking carefully to ensure the special frame was parallel to the surface before he fixed the camera into position.

Just as he was about to expose the first plate, the office telephone rang. Greenwood jumped. It must be something urgent. And damnably inconvenient. He could not take the time to dismantle his equipment, so he dumped the whole apparatus on the floor behind his desk, while he crossed to the telephone.

'Greenwood,' he announced into the mouthpiece.

'Communications here, sir. Priority telegram. Can you send a messenger down?'

Greenwood relaxed a little. If it was only 'priority', it was unlikely to contain anything that needed to be put in his report for the Germans. 'We're a bit short-staffed up here at the moment. I'll send someone down as soon as I can.'

'Very well, sir,' said the voice calmly and hung up.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Greenwood set up the camera again and photographed the report, page by page. He was just putting the last of his equipment back in the cabinet when the door opened. Greenwood froze.

The Permanent Under-Secretary himself strode into the room, stopping abruptly when he registered that his nephew was not there.

Greenwood gulped and snapped the cabinet shut. He moved rapidly to put his own body between the PUS and the loose pages of the secret report, scattered on his desk. 'Good afternoon, Sir Henry.' His voice cracked slightly, but he managed to make it sound like a cough.

'Young Ashburton not in the office today, Greenwood?' asked the PUS affably.

'Er... Sent him out for an early lunch. Bags delayed. Seemed the sensible thing.'

'Very convenient, as it happens,' said Sir Henry, nodding and smiling. 'Been wanting to have a bit of a chat about how young Peter is getting on. His mother keeps asking, don't you know.' He moved the chair from behind Ashburton's desk. 'Sit down, man. We can't talk properly with you standing there like a stuffed fish.'

Greenwood tried to swallow. There seemed to be an obstruction in his throat. While he was still struggling to find his voice, Ashburton reappeared, returning unexpectedly early from his lunch break.

The PUS stiffened and threw Greenwood a conspiratorial glance. Clearly nothing was to be said about their 'little chat'. 'Just the man I wanted to see,' he boomed at his nephew. 'Your mother was saying... Look, we don't want to disturb Greenwood. Why don't we talk down in my office?' The PUS drew Ashburton out into the corridor. 'Afternoon, Greenwood,' he finished politely, closing the door.

Greenwood sagged backwards onto his desk and dropped his head into his hands. What an escape! Until now, everything had been so straightforward; he had always managed the copying and the delivery without raising any suspicions. But this? Greenwood resolutely refused to allow himself to speculate. It had simply been a stroke of bad luck that the PUS had chosen to visit today. He usually sat tight in his own office, surrounded by flunkies. Greenwood wondered, not for the first time, how such a bumbling idiot had risen so high. Family, probably. With money and connections. That was always the way in England.

Action was what mattered now. Stick to the routine. First, Greenwood made sure the equipment was securely hidden. Next, he sorted the pages of the report and returned them to their proper place in the secret file. Then he sat down and made brief handwritten notes from the secret telegram. Finally, he packed up all the material for delivery to the Germans. Now all he had to do was to carry out the drop which should be, relatively speaking, a piece of cake. He was back in control. Nothing was going to go wrong.

Ashburton did not return until after two. 'Oh, I'm sorry,' he said, colouring slightly at the sight of Greenwood with his bowler in his hand. 'Were you waiting for me? I thought you would just have locked up and gone.'

'Not with secret files in the office,' Greenwood said in censorious tones, indicating the pink folders. 'Don't leave the office until I return.'

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Greenwood was alone in the sitting room of the duty clerk's little flat in the attics overlooking Horse Guards. Sunday had been quiet, as usual, except for one interruption in the early morning. Communications had rung with the standard message, 'Immediate telegram, sir. The messenger is on his way up with it.' It had been just another of those interminable ramblings about Ireland, but it had had to be sent down to the PUS's country house by special messenger. It seemed the Government had no time for anything but Ireland these days.

Greenwood had brought up some confidential files on the Serbian problem from his office. He now extracted a number of pages and set up his camera equipment on the small table. A few minutes, and it would all be done. He smiled to himself as he worked. But then he heard the flat's outer door opening. Good God! Someone was coming in! He swept the papers back into the file, sat the camera equipment on a chair and pushed it under the table just as the sitting room door opened.

The PUS, again! And on a Sunday! What the hell was going on?

'Glad it's you on duty, Greenwood,' said Sir Henry. 'Bit of a flap on. Ireland, again.'

The PUS came further into the room. Greenwood discovered he could not move. He was standing with his hand grasping the back of the incriminating chair as if glued to it.

'The King wants to "help" with the Irish problem by calling a conference at the Palace. The Prime Minister is livid. It's the last thing we need, but we've got to go through the motions. The Foreign Secretary insists our contribution be done today. He's coming in himself.' The PUS shook his head in disgust. 'Thing is, I haven't been able to pull in enough staff. I know it's not your bailiwick, old boy, but I'd appreciate it if you could help out.'

Greenwood felt as if he were drowning. The PUS was smiling expectantly, waiting for Greenwood to put the papers away and accompany him downstairs. There was no way of refusing his 'request'. Greenwood was trapped. And the waters were rising around him. Unless the camera could be hidden, the messengers would surely see it when they came up to tend the fire. Greenwood would be exposed, arrested, imprisoned – or worse. His body began to feel weak. He could hardly breathe. He was going to go under.

Scrabbling for a lifeline, he grabbed the first idea that came into his head. Words tumbled out. 'Flash telegram from Vienna, sir. Communications just telephoned. The Archduke's been assassinated in Sarajevo.'

Sir Henry's relaxed manner vanished. 'Right,' he said. 'I'll get back to my office straight away. The Foreign Secretary will need to be told.' He waved a hand at the files. 'Finish here and come down as soon as you can, Greenwood. We'll need you.'

Greenwood had no time to think. In seconds, he had hidden the equipment and returned the papers to the files. There would be no copies for the Germans this time. He looked round the room, checking automatically. Yes, he was safe. No evidence to be seen anywhere. He was safe.

It was only then that he remembered precisely what, in his panic, he had actually said to Sir Henry. What on earth had possessed him? Had he been so focused on the Serbian question and the royal visit that he had turned Post's vague warnings into reality? The PUS would soon learn there was no flash telegram and no assassination. And then...

The telephone rang again. To Greenwood's ears, it sounded much more strident than usual. 'Greenwood.' His voice cracked and no sound came out. He swallowed. 'Greenwood,' he said again, too loudly.

'The PUS wants to see you, Greenwood,' said the private secretary abruptly.

'I'll come at once,' Greenwood replied automatically, replacing the receiver. What else could he do? And, oh, God, what on earth could he say? His heart was pounding so much that he feared it might burst. This time, there was no escape.

He sucked in a long breath. He might be an Englishman but he would face his fate with the straight-backed pride of the German aristocrat he had hoped to become. He started for the door.

The solution came to him as he was trudging down the final flight of stairs to the PUS's opulent office. Of course! Why hadn't he thought of that before? The answer was so simple! The dirty paint on the walls of the stairwell seem to brighten under his gaze. He found he could breathe again. He would say that the call must have been a hoax, dreamt up by the young recruits, Ashburton's cronies. Just the sort of silly jape that the young idiots would play on an older man. The fact that he shared an office with the PUS's nephew would make him an obvious target.

The PUS's outer office was almost fully manned. The clerks were scribbling furiously, heads down. The principal private secretary's expression was sour, as if he had tasted something rancid. He narrowed his eyes as he looked up at Greenwood. 'Take a seat, Greenwood. Sir Henry will see you shortly.' He sounded distinctly hostile.

Greenwood sat obediently on one of the hard leather chairs, with his knees tight together and his hands clasped in his lap. He waited. And waited. His miraculous solution was beginning to feel less convincing by the minute. He bent his head, staring down at the gleaming toes of his black Oxfords, hoping his face would not betray his mounting anxiety. He tried desperately to ignore what was going on around him, even when the private secretary took a telephone call. There was not much to that anyway. The private secretary said only, 'Half an hour. Right.' Then the silence returned.

The atmosphere in the outer office seemed to be closing in on him. He could not move from his place. He did not dare to say a word to the private secretary. Instead, he told himself, over and over, that his solution was going to work. It would. It had to. He was better than these over-promoted buffoons.

Eventually, after what seemed like hours, a buzzer sounded. The private secretary rose. 'Sir Henry will see you now, Greenwood,' he said, opening the door to the PUS's room.

The PUS was ensconced behind his huge polished desk, looking grim. In spite of the sunshine pouring through the windows, Greenwood shivered. He was not invited to sit. For what felt like an age, the PUS simply fixed Greenwood with a basilisk stare. When at last he spoke, his voice was harsh. 'I want an explanation, Greenwood,' he snapped.

Exactly what Greenwood had expected. He had prepared for this. He could carry it off. He would. Assuming an expression of hurt pride, he launched into his story about the hoax. He had barely said two words, however, when the door opened again behind him.

The PUS looked up impatiently. It was the principal private secretary. 'I apologise for disturbing you, Sir Henry,' he said, 'but a flash telegram has just come through from Post in Vienna.' He handed the single sheet to the PUS and retreated back to the outer office. Greenwood was left, marooned, in the middle of the expanse of plush carpet.

The PUS was a quick reader. After barely a moment, he looked up and stared at Greenwood. 'Do you know what this is?' he asked.

Greenwood swallowed and shook his head. Of course, he didn't. What on earth was the old fool on about?

'Let me read you the summary. "Archduke Franz Ferdinand and wife shot during Sarajevo visit, today, Sunday 28 June 1914. Stop. Pronounced dead at 1100 hours local time. Stop. Killer arrested. Stop. Black Hand suspected. Stop." Do I need to go on?'

Greenwood shook his head again, trying to clear it. It was all true! Had been true, all the time. He felt a huge weight lifting from him as he dragged in a long deep breath. He smelt perfume. He knew he must be imagining it, but it was beautiful, all the same. It was the sweet smell of freedom.

The PUS was no longer paying attention to Greenwood. He was re-reading the telegram. Without raising his eyes, he said, 'Sit down, Greenwood. I may as well keep you on hand. Your knowledge of the Balkans could be useful when I brief the Foreign Secretary.'

Greenwood sank gratefully on to one of the red leather sofas. He could hardly believe what had happened. He had been spared. He was not going to drown after all.

It was only then that he noticed there was a vase of freshly cut roses on the table behind the sofa, their scent filling the huge room. So the perfume was real. Just as there really were such things as miracles after all!

Gratefully drinking in the blessed, heady perfume, he watched, half-dazed, as the Foreign Office's emergency procedures moved smoothly into high gear. The PUS instructed his private secretary to arrange an immediate meeting with the Foreign Secretary.

Messages were to be prepared for despatch to Downing Street and the War Office. The King would have to be told. It was admirable, a model of efficiency. Almost Germanic.

The PUS rose from his desk and made for the door, presumably to go to his meeting with the Foreign Secretary. Greenwood rose politely to follow him out, relieved to find that his legs had their normal steadiness. He was fully in control again. These idiots had been so very easy to fool.

At the last moment, Sir Henry paused in the open doorway, his hand on the brass knob, and turned to face Greenwood. 'By the way, Greenwood,' he said quietly, 'how did you know what was in the telegram?'

'I...I beg your pardon, sir?' Greenwood felt the blood draining from his face.

'Come now,' said Sir Henry, 'you told me you'd just had the information from the Communications centre. But the telegram hadn't been delivered. And the telephonists would never reveal the contents. They can't very well, can they, when it's already in a sealed envelope?'

Greenwood's mouth opened, but no sound came out.

'Sorry I can't wait for your explanation, old boy,' continued the PUS in his heartiest old-buffer voice, 'but don't worry. You can explain it all to the Major here.'

As if on cue, a gentleman of military bearing appeared beside Sir Henry. In one hand he was carrying something which looked suspiciously like Greenwood's camera. In the other was a clutch of gaily-coloured postcards.

The topmost card showed St Elizabeth of Hungary, holding a bunch of roses.

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