

THE SENIOR ADVISER



EDMUND-GEORGE KING

The Senior Adviser

*Conscience is but a word that cowards use,
Devis'd at first to keep the strong in awe;
Our strong arms be our conscience, swords our law.*

William Shakespeare (*Richard III*)

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Although set in an historical context, *The Senior Adviser* is a work of fiction.
Its main characters are all fictional; and any resemblance to existing persons
or events is therefore accidental.

The author

PART ONE



The Lakes District, England, March 1970

‘AND NOW’, THE newsreader uttered, ‘on with our international news bulletin. The Rhodesian government confirmed yesterday its decision to proclaim the country a Republic, a move many diplomats see as severing its last constitutional links with the United Kingdom. Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith told local reporters that there would be “no turning back on the decision”. Whitehall sources say Prime Minister Harold Wilson is significantly concerned at this latest development.

‘In the Middle East, no progress has been reported in the standoff on the Israeli-Egyptian border ...’

John Fletcher switched off the radio abruptly. It was silent inside the Rover, save for the humming of the engine and the sound of tires on the wet countryside road. He did not need to listen any further. They had discussed the Egyptian-Israeli crisis in detail the day before, at the joint services briefing at MI-6, with the head of the service himself in attendance. He already knew far more than he could hope to learn from the newscast.

As for Rhodesia, he could only feel some vague sadness that it had all played out that way. He had only once been to the former colony, to play rugby in the late 1940s, but remembered those days with fondness; just as he recalled the bravery and patriotism of the two officers from Mashonaland who had been captive with him in the jungles of Burma. Now, he thought, those officers probably felt Britain had betrayed Rhodesia and its settlers. But then, this was 1970 – and the British Empire was no more. Maybe this was what the Rhodesians had failed to grasp.

Fletcher again concentrated on the road. The way to Burford Castle – through the picturesque Lake District from Windermere half way to Patterdale – was a familiar one. But this was early March, and the cold morning mist rolling from the Solway Firth had turned into light rain, not just hampering visibility but making the road slippery too.

‘Late winter,’ he mumbled while carefully negotiating a sharp bend in the road. ‘It surely won’t be warm in Aberdeen ...’

Yet he was looking forward to seeing his old hometown, and to the hearty meal his sister Aggie would no doubt prepare for dinner. But he first had to run his errand at the castle. He was not sure the Earl would welcome the news he was bringing. But then, the Minister of Defence himself had recommended he made the call.

Recognising the Portland stone pillar that marked the entrance to the property, John Fletcher turned into a narrow gravel road that meandered between two thick hedges. Another five minutes, and he had in his sights the castle with the slated roofs of its two turrets glistening in the rain. This large, austere manor had been built in the early eighteenth century by Richard Lascelles, the first Earl Willingdon; a reward for loyal services in the armies of Queen Anne.

Fletcher stopped the car close to the marble staircase that led to the porch. The door opened just as he climbed out of the Rover and Peter, the butler, came out to greet him.

‘Welcome to Burford Castle, Sir,’ he said with a courteous nod.

John Fletcher greeted him with equal politeness.

‘I’m afraid Lord Willingdon is not back yet from shooting,’ Peter went on. ‘We are expecting him any minute, though. Would you like to wait for him in the library?’

‘I would be delighted to,’ replied the visitor with a smile, in a clear, polite voice that retained the accent of his native Scotland. ‘And please don’t feel bad – I’m early.’

The butler cast a quick glance at the familiar silhouette standing in front of him, wrapped in a dark-blue overcoat. Captain John Fletcher, a man of medium height yet solid build, with a strong neck and broad shoulders developed in the rugby scrums of his youth, was nearing fifty. Indeed, since his last visit to Burford Castle a year earlier, the close-cropped dark hair had turned greyer and a few more furrows had appeared around the temples and near the thin, slightly hooked nose. As for the hands, they had been forever weathered by years of sailing. Yet the general impression of the man remained one of energy and determination.

Peter led the visitor into a slightly dark but comfortable library. Hot coals glowed in the fireplace and John Fletcher’s coat and gloves were taken from him. When the butler offered him a drink, he asked for a cup of tea.

‘Lord Willingdon should be back within twenty minutes at the latest,’ said Peter as he retired.

Left alone in the library, the officer slowly paced up to the window

overlooking the rose garden and the lily pond down to the hedge and fields. The rain had stopped, but long streaks of grey clouds billowed along the gloomy sky. With the wind blowing such high mist from the North Sea, there would be no sunshine today. Turning away from the window, Fletcher gazed at the rows of old books accumulated by generations of Willingdons. Pre-eminent among them were volumes about Ancient as well as British history. Fletcher repressed a smile, for these two topics had become pet loves of Lord Willingdon these days. Well, Burford Castle was a lonely place at best, so a man living there on his own needed to develop strong interests.

The door opened suddenly, and a middle-aged man in a tweed jacket and shooting breeches walked in, casually brushing droplets of mist from his collar and sleeves.

‘My dear Captain Fletcher! What a pleasure to see you!’

‘The honour is mine, Lord Willingdon.’

He warmly shook the hand which his host, a grey-haired gentleman in his early fifties, with blue eyes and a face that was benevolent despite the slight severity of the moustache, graciously stretched towards him. Although the two men were not close friends, they clearly knew and respected each other.

This was despite the fact that much in their social backgrounds separated them. The commanding officer of the Royal Navy, born forty-eight years earlier to a solicitor’s clerk in Aberdeen, had needed a bursary to study at the Heriot Public School in Edinburgh. Lord Edmund Lascelles, the Seventh Earl Willingdon, was one of Britain’s wealthiest landowners, and his family had served kings and queens since the days of the Stuarts. Thus they had little in common, except perhaps for a shared passion for sailing – and, of course – two gruelling years together in a Japanese PoW camp in Burma, after the fall of Singapore.

Of this experience, they never spoke. Silence sufficed to share such memories.

Lord Willingdon and Captain Fletcher had kept in touch, though irregularly, over the years. Not that the Seventh Earl lacked social graces or intelligent conversation: in fact, he was well known for being a pleasant, generous gentleman whose interests clearly extended beyond grouse-shooting or fox-hunting. Nevertheless, he retained that aristocratic demeanour with which the Navy officer had never been fully at ease. And besides, either by nature or because of life’s experiences, neither of them was particularly talkative.

They sat by the fire, sipping tea and contentedly filling up on warm toasts. Lighting a small cigar, Lord Willingdon asked his guest about his wife Evelyn and the boys. Fletcher replied indifferently.

‘Bill’s still in Australia right now; and Tom is in his second year at Edinburgh University. My sister Aggie invited him for lunch on the weekend, so I should see him on Saturday.’

Lord Willingdon did not push the matter any further. Fletcher never seemed to enjoy talking about his family.

‘Anyway,’ he went on, ‘I sure am pleased that you stopped by on your way to Aberdeen, Captain Fletcher. I do not get that many visitors around that time of the year. But this does not answer all my questions: what is this in your letter, about a personal message for me from the Minister?’

John Fletcher made an apologetic gesture.

‘Of course, the Minister could have written to you himself,’ he said, ‘but he knew of my plans to pay you a courtesy call anyway. Milord, are you still planning to cruise the Bahamas in search of lost pirate vessels, come the summer?’

Lord Willingdon nodded vigorously. ‘Let me show you something, Captain Fletcher.’

He led his guest to an old chest of drawers in the corner of the library, next to a table bearing old maritime instruments and a terrestrial globe. Turning the key of the top drawer, after a brief search he produced an old yellow page of paper damaged by time, but on which characters were still fairly easy to decipher.

‘The problem with the history of pirates,’ the Earl went on, ‘is that apart from the writings of Captain Johnson and a few others like Esquemeling, we have very little evidence of what actually happened, and very few artefacts left to look at. Or rather, there are plenty of these artefacts; but they lie underneath the sea, where many of the pirate vessels or the ships they plundered are buried. But few people have bothered, or had enough money, to investigate these wreck sites seriously. Nobody, of course, except for some treasure hunters who may have looted a few coins; and, in general, do more damage than good to the sites they explore.’

‘That I grant you,’ Fletcher nodded.

‘Exactly – but this is where I could be helpful. I have enough money to finance some searches. Besides, there are friends and family willing to help me, provided I turn the search into an enjoyable cruise for them and their loved ones. And I’m not into the gold for its own sake, you know – just into

providing our national museums with enough artefacts pertaining to that strange period of British Naval History.’

‘But this document, milord?’

Lord Willingdon held the old paper to his chest, not without some pride.

‘This document, Captain Fletcher, is something I stumbled upon by chance nine months ago in an antique fair. One of the curators at the Royal Maritime Museum, Dr James Barclay, has helped me identify it as a genuine letter from Governor Woodes Rogers of the Bahamas, dated September 1719, to Captain Joshua Pierce, on board HMS Formidable in Nassau Harbour. You remember the situation in the Bahamas at that time, Captain?’

‘If my memory is correct,’ replied the officer, ‘by early 1719 Governor Rogers had managed to re-establish some form of royal authority in the Bahamas; the pirate haven of New Providence had been destroyed, and the notorious Blackbeard had been killed in combat somewhere on the coast of North Carolina. This was more or less the end of the ‘golden age’ of piracy on the Spanish Main.’

‘Exactly. And this is when the remaining pirate captains, those who had rejected the royal pardon, decided to sail back to the Indian Ocean, where they continued to prosper for a few more years. There was even, historians report, a meeting of some of these captains – notorious ones like Cocklyn, Bellamy, or even that French scoundrel, La Buse, real name Olivier Levasseur. This is when they took the decision to sail away to the East.’

‘I do remember reading about it, milord,’ Fletcher concurred.

‘Well, my dear Captain, this letter speaks exactly about that infamous meeting – and furthermore, informs the then captain of HMS Formidable that following that meeting, a freak storm erupted and wrecked some of the ships from the pirate flotilla in the vicinity of Eleuthera, one of these flat coral islands of the Bahamas about seventy nautical miles from Nassau. The letter specifically instructed Captain Pierce to scour the islands near Eleuthera; and look for potential survivors of the wreckage. And to bring them back in irons to Nassau.’

He handed the old letter to the naval officer.

‘What I have been unable to ascertain, even after browsing through archives, is whether Governor Rogers succeeded in having some pirates brought back to Nassau. But here we at least have the evidence that he tried.’

John Fletcher read the document at length and held it for a minute or two between his fingers, as if to make sure it was genuine. A vague smile appeared on his lips. After all, he was a Navy man through and through, and

holding a document pertaining to the naval history he knew so well could not but raise emotions in him.

‘So your plan, milord, is to cruise the Bahamas, especially round Eleuthera Island, and look for traces of these forgotten wrecks?’

The Earl nodded.

‘Absolutely. I already have the boat – the *Nereid*, a hundred-foot yacht built two years ago for charters in the Bahamas. Richard found it the last time he was down there. It is fully equipped for diving, and I have made sure that cabins have been upgraded to the luxury standards which befit my guests.’

‘Which guests will those be, if I am not indiscreet?’

‘You’re not. First of all, my sister Rowena and my brother-in-law. We long planned to go sailing together, and they have agreed to contribute to the costs of the expedition.’

Fletcher knew both the Earl’s younger sibling and her husband, Count Hermann von Neuberg, a German nobleman from Württemberg. In fact, Lady Rowena chaired the charity which occupied most of the days of the officer’s own wife, Evelyn.

‘Then Mr and Mrs Simpson should be joining us too, as he is also funding the expedition. With Harriet and Richard.’

The officer winced. Richard was his wife’s nephew, son of the late Wing Commander Donald Crosby, a fellow prisoner in the Burmese PoW camp. It was through Commander Crosby that John Fletcher had met Evelyn and married her three years later. After the Air Force officer’s untimely death in 1954, Lord Willingdon had become unofficial ‘guardian’ to the young Richard and helped him become a commercial pilot. Richard had since remained close to the Earl, but his choice of lifestyle had gradually created a chill between him and his uncle John Fletcher. The men had not seen each other since Richard’s wedding, in late 1968, to the young socialite Harriet Simpson, the daughter of Albert Simpson, a wealthy shipowner and Conservative Member of Parliament for Dorking, Surrey.

‘Then,’ the Earl went on, ‘I have asked Dr Barclay to join us, for his expertise may be invaluable if we do indeed find wrecks. And finally, I would very much like to have Dr Phil Nemer with us on board. He’s an American, also an amateur expert on piracy, and a medical practitioner; always useful if one of us falls ill at sea. I am not a young man any more, Captain Fletcher, and you know I’ve had my share of ills over the years.’

The officer said nothing. He knew the ills his host referred to. Depression – followed by a lengthy battle with alcoholism. Of course, the Earl had

eventually recovered. But the bad years had left their mark on him for ever.

‘But now that I’ve explained all to you, Captain Fletcher,’ the Earl went on, ‘it’s my turn to question you: What is the Minister’s message? Surely the government has not suddenly decided to frown upon my proposed expedition?’

‘Not at all, milord – it is simply a safety issue. The government is worried – for your own sake; and for that of the guests you propose to take on board.’

Lord Edmund looked at him for a few seconds, incredulity sketching itself increasingly on his face.

‘Safety? You mean they are worried in Whitehall that we shall be attacked by robbers if we get hold of some pirate treasure? Well, I can assure you that as long as I’m on board the *Nereid*, I intend to keep regular radio contact with the Bahamian authorities ...’

Fletcher politely interrupted him.

‘I am not talking of robbers, Lord Willingdon. I’m talking of a potential terrorist threat.’