The Girl in Berlin

Elizabeth Wilson

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JACK MCGOVERN'S GLANCE swept the scene as he stepped off the Glasgow train. A beam of sunlight pierced the grimed glass roof. Steam billowed upwards from farting engines. Wrapped in the solitude of the crowd, he watched as his fellow passengers fanned out across the concourse and scattered, drawn towards the exit like lemmings.

The rush and echoing noise exhilarated him. The anticipation never failed, was always like the first time: he'd come to conquer London. Cast off the past. London was the future, his future, a place of light and brightness after the dark, rain-soaked north. London was freedom.

He'd had a seat on the journey south, but his long legs had been cramped and he'd had nothing to drink but one bottled beer. The carriage, crowded with dozing passengers, had been draughty and at the same time sweaty, and the best he'd managed was a feverish doze. Now exhaustion was replaced by anticipation as he stood on the platform and took his bearings, quietly, from habit, observing those who hurried, and those who loitered or looked round, uncertain, caught between the excitement and anxiety of travel. Especially those who loitered. They were usually the interesting ones.

The pale, wolfhound eyes that missed nothing seemed unexpected, set in his dark, saturnine face. He'd read somewhere that olive skin and black hair came from the ancient Picts, the men who'd lived in the glens before the red-haired, pink-faced Vikings arrived, but perhaps his height came from the Norsemen, as he was tall for a Scot, five foot ten. Any hurrying passerby who glanced at him would have thought him a fine figure of a man, but few noticed him, because he had the art, so necessary in his job, of fading into the background. His trilby shaded his face, his tweeds were unremarkable, his movements smooth and subtle. In London he could disappear in the slip-stream of seven million lives pouring through the labyrinth of the great city.

Had his left elbow not been shattered at Alamein, he might have stayed in his native land, but he could no longer lift his arm to shoulder height and that had ruled out both the army and the shipyards where his father had worked. So the injury had been a blessing in disguise, providing the opportunity to get away from the city and family he loved, but who constrained and oppressed him with their demands, their customs, their assumptions.

Nobody in the police force knew – and it continued to surprise him that they hadn't bothered to find out – that his father had been a communist. In the tenement kitchens of his school mates you often saw the Virgin Mary, the Sacred Heart or a reproduction of *The Light of the World* beaming down, but in his home it was Uncle Joe, Comrade Stalin who watched kindly over them.

McGovern senior had swelled with pride when his son got the scholarship to grammar school, but the education he so strongly believed in had gradually placed a wedge between him and his son. Jack McGovern hadn't followed his father into the shipyards. Instead he'd found an office job, but he was bored, so he enrolled at night class to study law, and somehow got in

with a bohemian crowd from the Art School. Among them was Lily. She and her middle-class, arty friends from Pollockshields and Hillhead had fascinated him and to them a worker's son from Red Clydeside was exotic, a romantic figure in these socialist times.

To old McGovern the new friends were tempting the son away from his working-class roots. Father and son had argued fiercely and things came to a head when McGovern told his parents he was marrying a coloured girl. For Lily was half Indian.

Like Jack McGovern, she didn't quite fit in. That – and because he wanted a different life – was why McGovern had left Glasgow, left Scotland, come to London and, almost on a whim, or to defy his father, joined the police.

He soon became a detective and now was seconded to the Special Branch. To be part of the state apparatus that spied on the workers was the ultimate act of a class traitor. And just as the Branch knew nothing about his background, so his father still didn't know the whole truth about the path he'd chosen: that he was dedicated to crushing subversion in every form, whether it was striking workers, trades unionists, or even militant tenants' movements. It was a secret he had to keep. His dad would have disowned him and he didn't want that, although in fact he'd disowned his father, or at least his class. Yet he still respected his father and didn't even know himself just why he'd rejected Glasgow and its fierce, proud working-class way of life.

McGovern stood for several minutes, no longer surveying the crowd, but suddenly longing for Glasgow after all, not because of his residual love for the blackened tenements, the dark streets and the stunted, shrunken men in their flat caps trudging through the sooty fog that passed for air, but because Lily was still there.

He squared his shoulders and made for the exit. He was keen to get down to the Yard.

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Three members of the Vice Squad were seated in the canteen and as McGovern closed in on them they were talking about the impending Messina trial. Gangsters; they loved that.

'The defence'll be bribery.'

'Get away with you.'

'Tell that to the marines.'

Hilarious. Then they looked up, slightly disappointed to see him back, but made room and were friendly enough. 'Here's the Prof.'

McGovern had to join in the laughter, but held himself superior to them. Most of them were bent: taking bribes, running toms. The bribery joke was only funny because everyone knew the gangster Messina had certainly had Vice Squad coppers in his pay at one time or another. Their double standards reeked of English hypocrisy. His methods, by contrast, were justified by their ends: to protect the state.

'How's Uncle Joe?' That was a joke too. They scorned the Special Branch as much as he held their lot in contempt. He was alien to them. He was a boffin, wasn't he, with all the stuff he knew about Commies, Nazis, the IRA. Not that people cared about fascists and republicans these days; it was all about the Reds now.

'Comrade Stalin is well, thanks for the enquiry.' He went along with the joke, although he knew, and they knew, it had a sting in its tail. It wasn't the Branch, but MI5 who dealt with communist subversion. MI5 were in the saddle these days and his colleagues liked to remind him.

Behind that also lurked the suspicion that perhaps it wasn't a joke at all. There was something about being a copper; you got tainted with what you were supposed to be fighting. Just as the Vice Squad were up to their necks in pornography and prostitution, so all the extremist ideologies they were supposed

to suppress contaminated McGovern and the Special Branch. It was a contagious disease and they were at risk from the infection because they were too close to the enemy. Furthermore, the Branch was distrusted on account of the aura of conspiracy that surrounded its officers. Their work took on the methods of their enemies: entrapment, blackmail and covert surveillance. To their fellow policemen, accustomed to the more straightforward methods of physical violence and bribery, they seemed sinister. Information, knowledge, after all, rather than the fist and the boot, were their professional weapons.

Above all they were just too brainy. They thought too much, were too clever by half. Such men were dangerous. Also, as McGovern freely admitted to himself, you had to be a bit unhinged to do the job. Men were drawn into this neck of the woods by some kind of obsession. He himself was fascinated by the conspirators he encountered, fanatics in thrall to a single obsessive idea.

He soon tired of sparring with his fellow detectives and escaped up to his poky office on the third floor. It got little daylight, because it looked out on a light well at the centre of the building, but McGovern liked it because it was out of the way and seldom attracted visitors. His assistant was seated at a desk against the wall, laboriously hand writing what McGovern assumed at a glance was some kind of report.

'I thought you weren't back till tomorrow, sir.'

Manfred Jarrell showed no surprise, but then there was little that surprised him. His accent suggested a privileged family or at least a public-school education, but he was as cagey as McGovern about his background. His hair, worn too long, was a violent shade of carrot orange, the contrast with which made his white, almost greenish, spotty complexion look even more sickly. Yet no-one ribbed him about his morbid looks or poncey accent.

'Another bleeding *hin*tellectual! He's going in with you,' was

how Superintendent Gorch had introduced the lad. McGovern still didn't know quite what to make of Jarrell, but had an uneasy feeling that the younger man had *him* worked out.

'I'm officially on leave till tomorrow, but Gorch wants to see me.' He knew he was scheduled for bodyguard duty, looking after some middle-grade visiting American. Escort duty could theoretically be dangerous, but in practice was almost always a ticket to unbearable boredom.

'What's been going on while I was away?'

Manfred Jarrell shrugged. He blinked and pushed his round glasses up his nose. 'Electricians' Union,' he said, 'riddled with Reds. The British Electricity Authority want something done about it. All the leading officials are members of the Communist Party. They've smashed the wages freeze—'

'Okay, okay.' This aspect of the work made Jake a little uncomfortable. 'We all know it's run by Frank Haxell. That's nothing new. Why the sudden emergency?'

Jarrell shrugged and pushed his glasses up again. 'Because the wages freeze has gone west, I suppose. They've kind of won, haven't they.'

'Maybe for the moment, but one wee victory for the workers doesna' make a revolution.'

'Oh – and there was a message. *He* called yesterday. You're to meet him tomorrow evening.' Jarrell handed McGovern a torn-off sheet of paper on which was written the name of a pub and the time, 6.00 p.m. McGovern folded it into his pocket and stood thinking about it, interested, excited even. Jarrell looked at him. 'You'd better cut along to the boss, sir. He doesn't like to be kept waiting, does he.'

McGovern looked quizzically at his subaltern, who seemed to lack a proper understanding of his subordinate position. 'I'll do that,' he said.

Detective Chief Superintendent Gorch was one reason McGovern stayed in the job. He'd not seriously considered

cutting loose, but on dark days, on boring and frustrating days, and there were quite a few of those, he flirted with the idea of some wholly different life. He dreamed of living with Lily on the edge of Loch Fyne, scene of childhood holidays with his mother's crofter family. Lily would paint and he would … but what would he do? That was the problem. He would fish. Like surveillance, fishing required patience. You sat there for hours, waiting, not a twitch on the line until suddenly … But he knew he'd never be able to survive the pure air of the glens. He needed the smoke-soaked atmosphere of a great city. And Lily wasn't exactly wedded to the beauty of the Scottish landscape. She longed for the sun beating down.

He sat down in a leather chair near Gorch's desk.

'How's your father-in-law, then?'

'It's bad news, I'm afraid. My wife may be up there a while.'

'I'm sorry to hear it.' Gorch always spoke quietly. The vast jowls and flat, thick lips, the overgrown eyebrows, beefy cheeks and overall his great girth and weight encased in an old-fashioned, three-piece suit of dark grey birds-eye cloth, the waistcoat near bursting over his bulging stomach, added up to an air of reassurance rather than menace. He might have been a clergyman from years gone by or possibly a head gamekeeper, or even a benevolent workhouse master. He did not seem to belong at all to the modern era, to the rapid pace of the thrusting postwar world. But he would have been only two or three years old when Queen Victoria died.

Gorch's words sank in a friendly silence. After a while he added: 'They've got a job for you, lad.'

They – MI5; McGovern's pulse quickened.

Another pause. 'Kingdom thinks very highly of you.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Gorch eyed him cannily. 'I suppose you think they're a bunch of public-school pansies.'

McGovern smiled faintly, but shook his head.

'Kingdom is a clever man. He had a very good war record in intelligence. Some of them may be, let's say, amateurish, but he knows the score all right. Some say he was the best interrogator we had. Thing is – this is confidential – they are in a lot of trouble. In fact, they're in very big trouble indeed.'

'Sir?'

'They know there's a mole, known it for some time. And now – well, Kingdom will put you in the picture.'

'I'm meeting him tomorrow evening. There was a message.'

'Report back to me.'

Without Lily the flat was dusty and lonely. He longed to ring her, but telephone calls were expensive. It still surprised him she was his wife, that he'd ever dared ask her to marry him and that she'd accepted. She wasn't like other women, that is, like the women from his childhood. She didn't gossip with the neighbours, didn't clean and scrub everything in sight. On the contrary, she came from a wealthy family and she had a career.

She wouldn't have much time for her painting up there, looking after her father, now he was so ill … he pictured her at the easel, wearing her dirty, grey smock and frowning at her work, motionless for minutes on end, staring, her long, black hair caught up in a rough knot at the back. Her skin was pale and people often didn't realise her father came from India, especially as her name, Lily, seemed quite British – although she'd told him early on that it was also an Indian name, and chosen by her parents for that reason: that it was both Indian and Scottish, like her.

Her family, the wealthy Campbells, who ran one of the big Glasgow department stores, had been no more pleased than