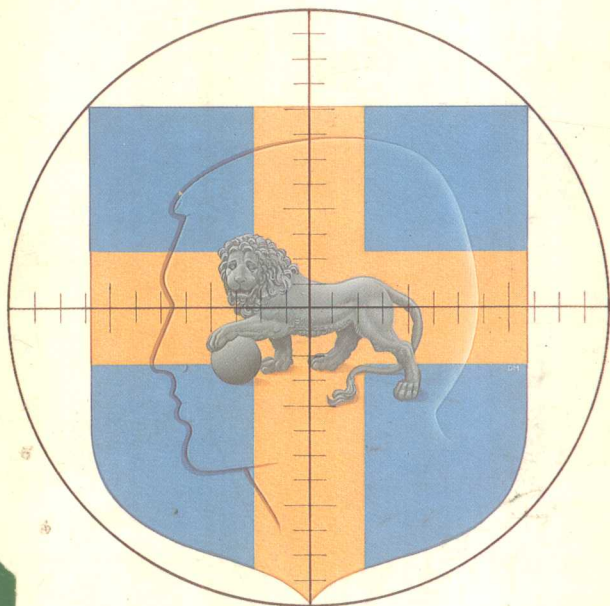


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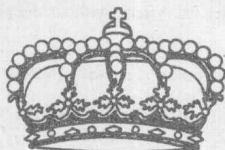
A SPY THRILLER

THE MESSENGER MUST DIE



jell-Olof Bornemark

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Kjell-Olof Bornemark

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II

The greeting card lay on the doormat along with a few brown envelopes. He saw it dimly through his steamed-up glasses and realized immediately what it meant. He was not surprised. On the contrary, it confirmed his suspicions. The insecurity he had felt and the doubts he had entertained these last few weeks, ever since that first newspaper report, could now give way to certainty. Actually it came as a relief. All that time, he had avoided drawing conclusions or making decisions. It was not his responsibility, not up to him. Now that the message had come he was ready—as he had been for over thirty years.

As he bent down to pick up the card, snow dripped from his fur hat down his neck, and he paused with a smile. Ten minutes, he thought. It can stay there for ten minutes. If it were time to move out, he could allow himself ten minutes before getting ready to leave. To do what, though? Take a last look around the apartment? Think about what he would miss? He felt no curiosity, no excitement; no more excitement than usual. He was always on his guard against any sign of self-deception.

He took off his shoes in the hall and went in stockinged feet into the bathroom to hang up his fur coat and hat. Even though it was freezing cold outside, at least 35 below, he was sweaty. He had spent the last quarter of an hour angrily shovelling away an enormous heap of snow a plow had piled up around his car. His next door neighbor in the apartment block, a Dane, had stood at his window watching all the time.

It must have looked odd. No sane person shovels out his car shortly before eleven on a frosty winter's night. But he had no choice. He knew that unease, not fear but unease, must always be kept at bay. If the alarm came that night, every second of the first few minutes would be of vital importance. A snowed-in car could not be allowed to impede his getaway. It would have been negligent not to set to work with a shovel, for as the night wore on his unease would have gradually taken possession of him, developing fatally into unnecessary and dangerous fear. He would not allow that to happen.

There had been a time when he worried about the Dane, whom he had noticed all too often standing like a guard at his kitchen window. It was certainly possible the Dane had been recruited by the opposition, even though they usually arranged for watch to be kept in a more discreet and professional manner. History could provide many instances of chauffeurs, waiters, and housekeepers taken on as extra informers. Nobody was so insignificant that he was beyond suspicion. When he had discovered why the Dane kept watch at his window, however, he had a good laugh to himself. In fact he celebrated solving the riddle by touring most of the city's bars, but he did not regret for one moment the apparently unnecessary suspicion he had directed toward the Dane for the past three weeks.

The reason the Dane diligently watched the street from his kitchen window was Clothilde, a frizzy white Persian cat—the only company the Dane had in the world. Clothilde blithely carried out her nightly raids while the Dane loyally

stood at the window, waiting for his faithless friend. That very evening the cat had followed Tragg in through the front door when he had finished shovelling snow. Clothilde had behaved arrogantly in the elevator, avoiding contact with his stiff, frosty trouser legs. By way of revenge he had left her alone out on the landing, after ringing the Dane's doorbell.

The ten minutes were almost up. He had changed into something dry and comfortable and fetched a beer and whiskey. Before going back into the hall to pick up the card and the rest of the mail, he had switched on the lamp by his armchair.

The greeting card was handwritten and addressed to Mr. Greger Tragg, *Attundavägen 17, Stockholm*, postmarked West Berlin. The picture had a turn-of-the-century air, two hands grasped in a handshake surrounded by a wreath of white, yellow, and red roses interspersed with greenery and lilies of the valley. The text was in German, and looked most elegant:

Many Happy Returns
on your
——birthday

Someone had written "50th" in the space provided. The same person had signed it in clear, old-fashioned handwriting. Two names:

Max and Bertha

At the top of the card, between the fancy bronze-colored frame and the flowers, was a thought-provoking verse in smaller print:

May happiness and cheer galore
Be what the future has in store

That was all. Slowly and solemnly he raised his whiskey glass to the empty room. "Cheers!"

He emptied the glass in one gulp and waited patiently. It should go away now. The chill in the pit of his stomach, like the after-effects of a kidney stone attack, had first hit him three weeks ago. A lieutenant, or was it a colonel—Tragg was well aware the press always got it wrong—had defected to the West. Among his papers was a list of names. Half a dozen men and women, all connected with the Insurance Company Tragg worked for himself, had been arrested the next night in various parts of West Germany and West Berlin, probably at exactly the same time. One of them managed to get away just a few hundred yards away from the police headquarters in Pullach, the intelligence center in southern Germany. The paper said the man had drawn his pistol from a shoulder holster, forced the driver to stop, disarmed the driver and the two security officers who had arrested him, pushed them out into the street, and with screeching tires raced past the police headquarters before disappearing into the night. It could well be true. West Germans are so much in awe of ministry officials that even if a person were arrested in the middle of the night on strong suspicion of espionage, it is quite likely he would not be subjected to the humiliation of a body search, at least not by low-ranking officers. Tragg also knew it could be a fabrication, a bold attempt to plant an established counterspy, this time on home territory.

That same week the headlines in Stockholm announced the arrest of a Swedish spy, a high-ranking police officer who was said to be working for more or less all the powers—Russia, the United States, and the Arabs. Then, a few days later, the Israeli security services returned a Swedish ex-army officer to Stockholm, handcuffed to be on the safe side, and accompanied by stony-faced Shin Beth men. He was taken straight from Arlanda airport to the high-security block in Bergsgatan. This was the worst case of espionage in Sweden since the days

of Colonel Wennerström, and had been leaked to the press by the Swedish secret service, SÄPO.

Greger Tragg sat at home that first week, taking it all in. He read the newspapers in great detail and was careful not to miss any news bulletin on the radio or TV. Despite poor reception, he sat by his radio set every night and listened to agitated German commentators expounding at length on the decadence of their government administration and the treacherous infiltration by fellow-Germans from the East whose views differed from their own. When it came down to it, they had little more to say than the succinct Swedish reports.

He spent most of his time waiting for the telephone to ring. He left his apartment reluctantly three times a day; eight o'clock in the morning, four in the afternoon, and twelve midnight, for half an hour at a time. It was the cold that forced him out. The temperature remained constant at about 25 below during the day, and sank to around 35 below at night. He cursed the fact that he had tried no harder to get one of the few available free garage spaces in the building. Of course, he could have rented one, but it might have drawn attention to him, and attention was one of the things Greger Tragg always tried to avoid. As a result, his Volvo was parked out in the open alongside all the other snowed-in and iced-up cars, at least half a dozen of which looked exactly like his own. Many of the owners had given up the unequal struggle with winter, having failed to start their cars despite such ploys as spare batteries and tows. Tragg knew that the only solution was to run the engine often so the oil had no chance to thicken.

He was drinking less than usual, and only went to the liquor store once to restock with whiskey and beer. His suitcase stood in the hall, ready packed. It contained only the bare necessities: underclothes, shirts, money, and passport. Next to his suitcase was a spare car battery, permanently on

charge. He had bought the charger for a few hundred kronor. Even if he was asleep when the call came, he would be able to leave the apartment within five minutes.

The telephone rang on four occasions that first week. Each time, he started breathing again after the third ring. The agreed procedure was simple: two rings, a pause of forty-five seconds followed by two more rings and a pause of thirty seconds. He then was to lift the receiver, and a totally unknown voice would give him the crucial order. Five different meeting places had been arranged, each with its designated code-word. The most distant one was in Årjäng, not far from the Norwegian border. The nearest was the stableyard at the Solvalla racetrack in Stockholm.

After a week, Tragg decided to return to his normal routine. He signed off at the health insurance office, and took up his newspaper contacts once more. He wrote freelance for several weeklies, supplying them mainly with popular scientific articles. No one had missed him, in fact. His type of material was regarded as a useful space-filler, and he was retained because the editors found it convenient to have a number of regular features, and because he was cheap. He used a pseudonym, and was the only one whose articles did not have a picture of the author.

Greger Tragg felt it was clear by now that the Berlin defector had only a limited amount of information to sell, and the immediate threat to his own person was past. He was even more convinced, but also somewhat confused, when he read in an evening paper a few days later that according to a so-called reliable source, SÄPO suspected there was still a leak in the organization at a very high level, and that the latest arrests, serious though they might be, were insignificant compared with the one they had so far failed to make. The writer indicated official fears that a foreign power had access to material at such a high level that the two agents exposed so far could not possibly be the source.

Someone had deliberately leaked this information, pos-

sibly to defuse the interest of the press and the general public in the latest revelations. After this remarkable article, which could also be interpreted as a warning to a very small number of people, the mass media carried very little on the two spy affairs. Someone had put the muzzle on, and it would only be taken off, very cautiously, when the prosecutions began. Such cases were still heard in public in the Kingdom of Sweden.

If anyone had hit upon the idea, unlikely though it might seem, of asking Greger Tragg if he thought there was a leak at the top in the Swedish defense and security forces, he would not, of course, have received a direct answer. Tragg would have shrugged his powerful shoulders and said that in the first place he had no idea about such matters, and in the second place he couldn't care less. Both claims would have been untrue. Tragg was not the leak. However, he was one of only three people who knew the identity of the person concerned.

The silence in the apartment was broken by a long, drawn-out noise from his neighbor's bathroom. The TV was off the air and it was time to go to bed. His mind made up, Greger Tragg emptied his whiskey glass and took out his diary from his jacket pocket; it was a traditional diary with each day of the year dedicated to a particular Christian name. Today was the nineteenth of January. Max's nameday was the first of February, and Bertha's the eighteenth. He had been given two alternative arrival dates, and this generosity together with the picture of the firm handshake on the card was the decisive, calming indication that all was well.

He decided on Max straight away. On the first of February he would be in Berlin and meet Ulrich Langer. The number 50 on the greeting card did not only mean

Come!

but also

New instructions

For a moment he wondered whether he should pour himself another whiskey, but desisted. He did not really miss it. He was going to have a lot to do in the near future. A quarter of an hour later when he turned off the bedside lamp after setting the alarm clock for seven o'clock, he smiled for the second time that evening. Just like an ordinary citizen, he thought.

Five minutes later, he was asleep. The last trace of unrest had gone, replaced by firm resolution and reaffirmed motivation for what was in store. Several days later, while he was waiting for the green light at a pedestrian crossing, Tragg became momentarily aware that the chill feeling in the pit of his stomach had disappeared. He was surprised it had ever existed.

II

The pungent smell of ammonia hung in a haze over the stables at the Solvalla trotting track. It tickled the nostrils like a drug, inspiring dreams and foolhardiness, hopes and self-deception. The weather had improved during the week, but the thermometer on the wall of the check-in still indicated 20 below and the horses returning from the warm-up lap had ice on their muzzles and in their manes. Despite the cold there were plenty of people milling about in the open space between the stables and the newly built Traverna.

It was half past five, an hour before the first race was due to start, when Greger Tragg came in through the stables gate. Despite the wintry weather the track was clear and well-raked; lit up by powerful spot-lights, with the snow piled up on all sides it looked as well-tended as a garden path. Out of the glare, more and more people were beginning to drift toward the restaurants and stands.

Tragg joined them. Now and then he nodded to familiar faces, knowing nothing of their owners except that he had happened to sit near them in the stands on some occasion or other, and exchanged a few words. There were faces he had

been greeting for fifteen years, watching them grow older but knowing nothing about the bettors themselves. Racing crowds are made up mostly of regulars who turn up faithfully at every meeting. They are part of a closed society, and new members are admitted only after many years of compulsory attendance. Tragg occasionally bumped into such a face in town. Away from the horses and the Tote, without a program in their hands and binoculars around their necks, smelling of aromas other than the seductive scent of ammonia, it could well take several seconds before he recognized them. Such meetings generally culminated in a hasty nod and an introspective smile, an acknowledgment that as far as a racing man is concerned the only meaningful thing in life is the races, nothing else.

He could not avoid being known at the racetrack, but very few people actually knew his name. The closed society had unwritten laws and one basic principle: all acquaintanceships came to an end the moment one passed through the gates. Nowhere are anonymity and integrity as jealously protected as among gamblers. Every undue question from an outsider is met with scornful silence or speechless incomprehension.

As he passed on through the biting wind toward the old restaurant, Tragg missed the coal-burning braziers that used to stand there. There had been winters when he used them as a meeting place. Among the mass of frozen fingers thawing out over the smoky coal fires, rapid exchanges of particularly informative racing cards had taken place, but the information they held was by no means the names of horses and jockeys running that day. It was a classic procedure, but had now been replaced by a much more reliable method.

Solvalla had changed. It had been modernized and asphalted, and Tragg did not like it. Soon, the old restaurant would disappear as well, to be replaced by a new concrete block with plenty of steel and glass. As yet there were no TV

cameras keeping an eye on the spectators, but they would soon come once they started to knock down the ramshackle old wooden buildings with all their little passages and hiding places. To the detriment not only of all the pickpockets, but also of himself.

The state is the only certain winner at the races, and every day during a Solvalla meeting at least a million kronor are earned for the benefit of society. Somewhat less secure and, moreover, branded as criminal by the state authorities, is the business of bookmaking. The bookies are well-established and more or less untouchable by the police, who seem to have given up long ago the battle against this particular branch of financial crime, even if they make a raid every year or so for the sake of appearances. One reason for the lack of interest on the part of the police is that it is almost impossible to prove anyone is keeping a book, Swedish style. A few words exchanged with a neighbor in the stand or over a drink in the restaurant, a whispered message to someone who likes to stand at a particular bend, or at most some barely decipherable squiggles in a racing program is not much to put before a court as evidence. Everyone bets on credit, and debts are settled in town. The police also understand that even if bookmaking is a crime in the eyes of the law, it is in no way immoral as far as the bettors themselves are concerned. The bookmakers always give higher odds than the state-owned tote, sometimes as much as nine per cent more after rounding up the decimals. Moreover, the police can never count on any help from informers. The surest way of getting into trouble is to interfere in other people's business. In racing circles a particularly grave case can result in a crippling injury for life, or an early death. At the very least it means the cold shoulder, not only on the course but at all the other venues where gamblers gather, an exclusion that lasts forever.

Piero Svanberg was a bookmaker, a Swedish-Italian aged about twenty-five. He had his regular table in the far corner of

a bar behind the old restaurant. The table was stained and badly cleaned, but years of spilled beer and nervously stubbed-out but still burning cigarettes had given it a resilient quality which not even a disinfectant firm could have dealt with. It had been new as far back as the days of Frances Bulwark, the famous winning trotter. Now it exuded a smell of stale beer like the toothless mouth of an old man.

Piero Svanberg could not see the racetrack from where he sat, but his view of everyone who entered the place was all the better for that. When he caught sight of Greger Tragg his face lit up, and he stood up politely.

"What a surprise!" he said, shaking his hand. "It must be months since I last saw you. Let me get you a beer."

Tragg nodded and sat down. As he polished his glasses he watched the bookmaker shuffling his way with considerable difficulty back into his favorite place right in the corner. The young man was a strange mixture, offspring of a lively, talkative, and totally unreliable Sicilian who made a short but much appreciated guest appearance in Stockholm at the beginning of the fifties, and a peasant woman from Ytterhogdal, tall as a Swedish spruce, cool and blond as a buttercup meadow in June, and sufficiently sensible to resist with pride the Italian's proposal to take upon herself the role of princess forever more. The Sicilian took the train back home to Palermo and was never seen again; the mother remained single, unapproachable and regal as ever over the years. The son could not speak a word of Italian. He was tall and scraggy in stature, his broad shoulders hunched as if from bearing heavy burdens in the forest. He had inherited a lot from his mother's father, but his head was Italian. Shiny black curly hair, a Roman nose, and bright black eyes with a dash of melancholy from the waters of a Swedish lake.

"I'd like to talk to you alone for a few minutes," said Tragg.

The bar was barely half full, and the men behind the beer

bottles were without exception engrossed in their racing cards or busy filling in betting slips. In the pale, nicotine-yellow light they looked like dozing seals on a rocky outcrop.

"Of course."

The waiter served their beer in response to a slight nod from Svanberg, who took out his binoculars case and stood it upright on the table.

"We're closed, Augustson," he told the waiter with a smile.

"Make sure no stupid jerk comes bursting into the office. The customers know."

"How's business?"

"Good. I could expand if I liked, but I don't want to. Not now at any rate. Three days a week I work as a cabby. I make a bit of cash and that explains why I don't starve to death. I live with my mother. Even the tax authorities must regard me as well-behaved."

"I need your help," said Tragg.

They drank in silence. Svanberg looked his companion calmly in the eye. Like all bookmakers he had a good memory and a well-developed ability to listen without forgetting. He waited. There was a smile in Tragg's light-blue eyes, but his voice was deep and tempered with seriousness.

"I'm going away. It could be for quite a while, and I don't want it known. Here is a set of duplicate keys to my apartment. I'd like you to go there once a week to check everything. Make sure there have been no visitors. Use dust and the hall carpet. The hall is quite badly lit and the carpet is red. Don't overdo it, but make quite sure you can't possibly make any mistakes. Do you drive your taxi on Thursdays?"

"That's the only day I'm on the day shift."

"Good! On Thursday afternoons the whole place is deserted. Most of the men are at work, and the women are doing the cleaning. They do the shopping on Fridays. The risk of bumping into someone in the elevator or on the staircase is

a hundred to one. There's only the Dane. He's curious. You know, the neighbor with the white Persian cat."

Svanberg nodded. "He'll remember me all right. I once asked him what the cat was called."

"Clothilde. Talk to him if need be. Answer his questions. Tell him you're watering the plants, that I've gone away. . . . But don't try to make excuses for yourself. . . ."

"I'll cope. There isn't a Dane in the land who can resist my Italian charm. It's sometimes a positive advantage to be a half-breed."

That was true. When Piero Svanberg switched on his Sicilian smile, he was a changed man. It was compelling without being overwhelming, and hard to be suspicious about. Just now he looked like a polite young man from the Italian middle class. Or like a volunteer in the Sicilian Mafia.

"All right. If you suspect the apartment is being watched or you're being followed, make sure you're right. Don't try and shake off anyone who's following you. Don't slink away if you think the entrance door or the apartment is being watched. Act openly and normally."

"And if . . . ?"

"Tell me about it when I call."

"When will you call?"

"Every Tuesday. How about some time between ten and half past?"

"Suits me fine. What do I do if anything has gone wrong?"

"You answer by saying, 'Good morning, Mr. Editor.' And then you don't need to wait for me to call any more, nor to go to the apartment. I'll contact you some other way. What's your cab license number?"

"1582."

"When the taxi intercom tells you one Thursday that you have to get in touch with your father at home, drive to the Central Station and wait in the line. I'll be there."