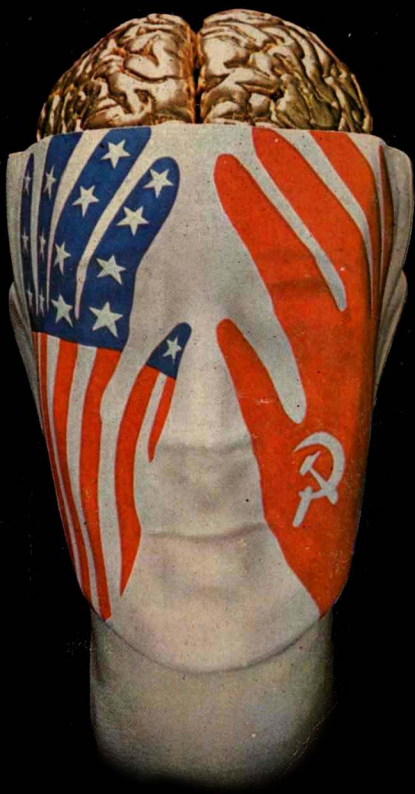




A PENGUIN BOOK

the antagonists

WILLIAM HAGGARD



Penguin Book C2703

The Antagonists

William Haggard is the pseudonym of a writer who was educated at Lancing and Christ Church, Oxford. Entering the Indian Civil Service in 1931 he became a magistrate and sessions judge before joining the Indian Army for service during the Second World War. He passed through the Staff College at Quetta and was promoted to G.S.O.1 on intelligence work. In 1945 he returned to work in Whitehall, where – to quote his own words – ‘I’ve been a layabout ever since’.

William Haggard has travelled widely in the East and South America but prefers now to stick to Europe ‘while it lasts’. His other books include *The Arena*, *The Unquiet Sleep*, *Venetian Blind*, *The Telemann Touch*, *Slow Burner*, *The Powder Barrel*, and *The Hard Sell* (all available as Penguins). They have been translated into most European languages. Living in ‘doctor-land’, near Harley Street in London, he also maintains a long-standing connexion with Italy, where he has a *pied-à-terre* near Venice.

William Haggard

The Antagonists

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Chapter One

The Ilyushin was half an hour late already, and the pilot had come back to tell Gorjan that now there would be more delay. He wasn't pleased. It was a scheduled flight, but he was Alexander Gorjan, and a compartment had been screened off for him – four first-class seats. He nodded at the pilot but did not speak. It was better to keep his temper. His head had begun to hurt again and he knew what that meant. It would hurt for two days at least, increasing agony, then suddenly it would be gone again. Or that was what had happened so far. And in a matter of an hour or so he would be giving a formal lecture to the Imperial Circle of Scientists.

He hadn't wanted to come but the President had insisted. The Andover Lecture at the Imperial Circle was a world occasion in the world of science; it had enormous prestige and the country could do with it. The President had almost pleaded, and that wasn't something he did often. He knew Gorjan hadn't been well of late but he would send a doctor with him. Alex Gorjan had declined the doctor.

Now he was wishing he hadn't. His head ached intolerably, forehead and neck too. With a feeling he knew was fear he looked down at his hands. Almost imperceptibly they had begun to twitch again. The reflex movement, uncontrolled, disgusted him.

No, he shouldn't have come. He'd been working too hard, but he was too much a realist to blame the fact. Men didn't have breakdowns through overwork alone, or his sort of man didn't. But they might if they burnt it both ends, they might if they mixed their drinks, made love to too many women. He was fond of drink, he always had been, and Sonia in particular had been intolerably beautiful. His smile was small but it wasn't dissatisfied. Sonia would remember him.

He put out his hand and pulled the curtain, looking at the aircraft's stuffily Edwardian decoration. The Confederate Republic

couldn't really afford the Ilyushin, but it had been offered by a neighbour on terms which had seemed generous but in practice had disclosed themselves as shamelessly usurious. Gorjan smiled sourly. Which ought to have been expected with that particular neighbour. Alexander Gorjan detested them.

He tugged at the curtain, flinching as his head moved. Outside the porthole was a cotton-wool sea of cloud: somewhere below was England. He hadn't seen it for fifteen years. He had enjoyed his time at Cambridge; he had even liked the English. Their hypocrisy hadn't troubled him, only their ignorance that they were hypocrites. But that you got used to, and undeniably Cambridge had been hospitable. It would be strange to see it again after this ridiculous meeting had been dealt with. He had a full week's programme and naturally Cambridge was on it. So for that matter was a place called Oxford. A good Cambridge man, he'd heard of Oxford.

Meanwhile he had to talk to them, these ancient prestigious has-beens. The Circle wasn't science but the graveyard of old scientists. He'd give them a show, though. His English was pretty good still, and he'd been rubbing it up. For Alexander Gorjan that hadn't been difficult. In the Confederate Republic a wish to rub your English up could sometimes bring the police on you with awkward questions about your intentions. But not on Gorjan. He was Alexander Gorjan, well enough known internationally to have been invited to give the Andover Lecture, and he was a good party man which was at least as important. He wasn't an apolitical scientist: on the contrary he was a communist and proud of it. He'd prepared his speech in writing but nobody had asked to see the script. He had unrivalled knowledge in his specialist line and soon he might have something more, but nobody had even hinted that in England he should guard it. He was a good party man in excellent standing.

Privately he put his country first. That too was acceptable in the Confederate Republic.

He rose to his feet suddenly as his head split in two; he gripped the table in front of him, grimacing. When the spasm was over he sat down shakily. The pilot had come back again, looking at him uneasily. His responsibility would end when Gorjan left his aircraft, and it was evident that was something he would be glad of. Gorjan asked shortly: 'Well?'

'Landing in five minutes, sir.'

'That's good.'

They were slipping through the cloud, the flaps falling smoothly, the note of the jets thickening. There was the faintest bump and a long braking run. When they had stopped the steward came to Gorjan first. 'This way, if you please, sir.'

Alexander Gorjan walked along the aircraft to the door. The gangway was already up, but he was surprised to find that it was dark. He had known they were late but not how badly. He opened his mouth and shut it grimly. He had other things to worry him than forty-five minutes' lateness. He must husband his strength, and carefully; he didn't dare risk a useless scene.

He walked down the gangway, a hand on the rail to steady him. The photographers held up cameras and the flashlights nearly blinded him. When he had his sight back he could make out a knot of men. One of them detached himself, shaking hands quickly. 'I'm Jensen,' he said, 'Professor Jensen. We've arranged to waive all formalities. There's a car by the runway and your luggage can follow.' Jensen looked at his watch. 'We'll just about make it.'

'But I ought to change first.' Gorjan had had very precise instructions about his dress. This was White Tie and Decorations. He had brought his decorations, and the fancy dress should have been hired for him in London. He'd sent measurements to his embassy and they'd promised to do the rest. A man from the embassy was to bring everything to the airport, and Gorjan was to have changed there. The schedule had always been tight. Gorjan looked around him, blinking still. His ambassador was coming towards him and another man he recognized as Stevan Starc, First Secretary. Both were in full evening dress but neither carried a bag. The ambassador looked at Gorjan, then looked again, pretending not to. For a second he hesitated, then he said soothingly: 'I'm afraid there'll be a change of plan.'

'But I can't go like this.' Alexander Gorjan was shocked. His country was communist but it respected the formal occasion. He couldn't lecture to the Circle in sports coat and flannel trousers. They'd think he was, well, a communist - their stupid idea of communists.

But Jensen had broken in again. 'We shall all understand,' he said. 'Of course.' His voice was quiet but his manner desperate.

The ambassador nodded briefly. His tone changed slightly as he spoke again, and Alex Gorjan could recognize the change.

'You'll have to go as you are. Jensen will explain things.'

Gorjan said furiously: 'He better had.'

They were talking their own language.

The car had slid up to them, and Gorjan and His Excellency got in. There were the driver and another man in front.

... That would be the bodyguard. Even in the Confederacy there was always a bodyguard.

In the half light the ambassador looked at Gorjan again. He'd been warned that he wasn't well, but he hadn't been warned of this. Alex Gorjan looked near to death. The ambassador said quietly: 'I'd sleep a bit if I were you. Take a nap.'

'I wish I could.'

It was seven o'clock and the traffic into London moderate. Gorjan shut his eyes and his head dropped instantly. His Excellency had once been a soldier; he knew when to be silent and this was a time for silence. He sat smoking quietly, watching Gorjan's grey face.

... He might make it or he might not. Tonight. The rest of the trip was clearly off. They'd been insane to let him come at all, but he was very strong. Tonight perhaps, with luck.

At Burlington House the ambassador nudged Gorjan gently. As his head came up there was a stifled groan.

'We're here.'

They walked through the portico, up the ugly, imposing staircase. For a moment Gorjan rallied. Turning to the ambassador he said: 'Talking first, I believe. Dinner afterwards.'

'That's the arrangement.' His Excellency was pleased with it. Formal talk after dinner he considered uncivilized. This was a concession by the English and one he appreciated. 'Talking first,' he repeated, 'eating afterwards.'

'Could you get me off the eating?'

'Yes, I think I could do that.'

'Then I'll let you know if you have to.'

They walked into a long cold room. It made Gorjan gasp. He came of a frugal race, but nobody in his country stayed freezing unless they had to. And these were rich men. There were a hundred perhaps, on chairs which looked intolerable, facing a dais. On the

dais a man was talking, filling in. There were two empty seats, and as Gorjan and the ambassador took them there was a burst of clapping. The speaker sat down and the chairman stood up. He said with a splendid brevity: 'I had intended a speech of welcome. Now you will be spared it. Not that it was necessary, for you all know our guest. His achievements speak better than I do. Your Royal Highness. Your Grace. My lords, ladies and gentlemen.' The chairman raised an arm, an actor's gesture. 'Doctor Alexander Gorjan.'

There was another burst of clapping, then silence as Gorjan rose. He was feeling a little better now. The typescript of his lecture was in his pocket but he had taken great pains with it; he knew it by heart and he was a courteous man. One shouldn't read a lecture unless obliged to. It wasn't polite. He opened his mouth: 'Ladies and gentlemen -'

He swallowed his words, astounded. In the third row of crazy chairs an old, old man had risen. He had a long, lined simian face and thin white hair. And he was talking.

... The appalling crisis in which humanity now finds itself ...

Gorjan sat down uncertainly. Perhaps he had blundered, perhaps made a fool of himself. The introduction had seemed clear enough, but here was this old monkey nattering.

... The moral dilemma which none of us can escape, all races and every creed. The conscience of right-thinking men ...

The man beside Gorjan pulled at his sleeve. 'It's Merridew,' he explained. 'Sir William Merridew.'

'Who's Merridew?'

'The Grand Old Man.'

It had sounded like an apology.

'But what's he talking about?'

'The bomb.'

'The bomb! But I'm not an atomic physicist.'

'I know you're not. He seems to have got it wrong, that's all. Nowadays he often does. He's ninety, you see, and more.'

Alex Gorjan was bitterly insulted. Atomic physicists had more than a little depreciated. Once they had been an aristocracy, but now the engineers had taken over. Atomic physicist indeed! He put his hand to his forehead. His moment of relief had gone. In a minute or less the pain would be unbearable.

But the chairman had risen again. 'Sir William's views', he was saying smoothly, 'are well known to all of us. And entitled, if I may say so, to our unqualified respect.' He bowed at Sir William Merridew. 'But on this of all occasions -'

'I will not be silenced.' The Polonius voice, a senile treble, ran up the scale alarmingly, cracked at the top. 'The future of humanity is in our hands, nay -'

Alex Gorjan had risen too. He was in dreadful pain again. He fingered his neck, feeling it where it joined his spine. His head was on his body still: it didn't seem so. He drew a deliberate breath. He had a fine deep chest and a fine deep voice came out of it.

'Silly old bastard. Ignorant clown.'

There was an appalled and appalling silence. The chairman got to 'Gentlemen', but Gorjan pushed him firmly down. He steadied himself with his other hand. The agony was purple now, then red. Through it his voice rang savagely: 'Fascist. Imperialist. Impotent aged pig.'

'Gentlemen, gentlemen, I beg you, I -'

Alexander Gorjan was suddenly terrified. He couldn't see, he was going blind. Sir William Merridew had disappeared, then he was back again, enormous, looming. Gorjan felt on the table, his hands moving urgently. There'd been water in a heavy glass carafe. His hands found it blindly for his eyes were still on Merridew. He hadn't dared move them. He pulled back his arm and for an instant Merridew was huge again. He threw and Sir William fell.

There was immediate pandemonium. Somebody was wiping blood from Sir William Merridew's face. Gorjan didn't see it. He was lying across the table; he was out.

A little earlier Colonel Charles Russell had been walking home from his cosily untidy room in the Security Executive. His day hadn't been more worrying than usual, and in any case he handled worry well. Which meant in Whitehall that when a man shut his office door behind him he could walk unhesitatingly into a different and wholly private world. Most servants of the State could not, or not the ambitious ones. They took work home, they fussed incessantly. Sometimes they made the Honours List, more often they didn't, and mostly they died within a year or two of pen-

sioning. Charles Russell hadn't been knighted but his expectation of life was excellent.

He walked across St James's Park, sixty but erect still, casually elegant, glancing at the evening paper as he went. ... So Dr Gorjan's plane had been considerably delayed. Charles Russell knew about Gorjan. It wasn't formally his business to watch the safety of very important visitors, but he would have agreed that one of the charms of work in the Security Executive was that its responsibilities were never defined precisely. A charm and often an advantage too. You paid for it of course, since when something went wrong you were apt to be carpeted by political masters who had forgotten or neglected to inform you of a danger. Colonel Charles Russell smiled. He liked it that way and he paid the price gladly. So the safety of Alexander Gorjan was the responsibility of the Special Branch, and Russell had a high opinion of its competence.

That hadn't prevented his slipping a man of his own into Gorjan's entourage.

He strode on briskly, thinking about Gorjan. Alexander Gorjan was a radar man, which in the context of contemporary anarchy meant an early warning man, and a scientist with an edge in early warning was at least as important as another with a bigger bomb or better rocket. In conditions of nuclear stalemate he could even be his master. But it wasn't only Gorjan's professional reputation which was interesting. Gorjan was a man, an authentic individual. The traditional picture of the international scientist was certainly a stereotype, and in the world of security stereotypes were dangerous over-simplifications. Not that Gorjan could ever have been considered one. Stereotypes be damned! This was a man.

Which, Russell reflected, had been one of his reasons for adding to the precautions which the Special Branch would certainly have taken. The Special Branch was efficient: give them a man's movements and you could go to sleep happily; and since most important visitors could be relied on to stick to a programme as rigid as a seminary's your sleep would be undisturbed. But Gorjan couldn't be relied on to follow a schedule which bored him. Take him to an official dinner – there were several, it seemed – and if the company were tedious Gorjan would turn to the wine. If that were good he would console himself. He was far too hard-headed to behave

regrettably, but it might be some stranger's taxi which he casually shared home. Leaving an official car, a Special Branch driver in it, untidily behind him. Or take him to a cocktail party and he wouldn't drink at all. He had the civilized man's contempt for cocktails but an equal eye for a pretty woman. When he saw one, if she liked him, he would take her on to dinner. To wherever she chose. To the Savoy perhaps, which was easy enough, or to some box of a *trattoria* which was not. The lady might not care a damn: the Special Branch shadow would.

Charles Russell's smile broadened. Gorjan was one to play by ear so that was the way he'd play it.

He let himself into his unpretentious flat and turned on the telly. There was a spy serial which he was watching avidly, though he knew that if spying in life had been as neat and well-constructed as this goggle-box thriller he would have been out of a job in a month. He settled with a drink. . . . Now the man in the Shaftesbury Avenue suit was obviously a suspect; he was *intended* to be a suspect, though he mightn't be the right one. The clothes were significant, and the flash cigarette-lighter. Whereas the slow sort of chap with the kindly manner. . . . It was accepted technique and entirely justified. If only life were like it.

When the telephone rang peremptorily Russell looked at his desk. Two instruments stood on it and their notes were a little different. This was the one without a dial. Russell rose resignedly, flicking off the telly. He picked up the receiver.

'Colonel Russell? It's Copeman here, sir.'

'Good evening, Copeman.'

'I hope you're going to think so, sir. I'm speaking from the Imperial Circle. There's been a, well - '

'Tell me.'

The voice on the telephone began to talk quickly. When it had finished Charles Russell said: 'I'd have given two ponies to see it. And afterwards?'

'They handled it pretty slickly. Merridew wasn't seriously hurt. His wife mopped him up and removed him. Gorjan was unconscious but his own people looked after him - his ambassador and another man called Starc. They had an ambulance there in no time. It took him to the Hemmingway Hospital.'

'The Hemmingway, you say? But that's out in the country.'

'If you call Egham country.'

'For the purposes you're paid for it isn't London.' Russell reflected. 'And who was with the ambulance?'

'Male nurse or maybe houseman. Driver. Attendant.'

'Recognize any of them? As friends of ours, I mean.'

'They were strangers to me.'

'Did anyone else board the ambulance?'

'Not that I saw. If you're thinking of our colleagues across the road there was one in the audience. Him I did recognize. And the usual sort of car would have been calling for Gorjan after dinner. That hadn't arrived by then. There was no dinner.'

'But our friend in the audience didn't go near the ambulance?'

'No. I expect he was telephoning – reporting for fresh orders. I'd have done that first myself if I'd had the same masters.'

'I shouldn't be surprised.' Charles Russell's voice was dry. He thought again. 'So our colleagues don't yet know that it's the Hemmingway Hospital?'

'I wouldn't say that, sir. The man we're talking about didn't come near the ambulance, but the attendant made no secret where they were taking Gorjan. A dozen people could have heard him, and for that sort of nervous breakdown the Hemmingway's an obvious bet. In any case, a little quick work on the telephone to the hospitals and –'

'You think our friends will be right behind the ambulance?'

'Maybe not *right* behind. There'll be a flap, of course – there always is on a change of plan. I give them half an hour.'

'Which I won't give anyone. Get over to this Hemmingway at once. Pick another man up if you can.'

'I can.'

'Then do.'

Russell returned to the telly. Somebody was creeping up on someone else, trying to get a shot at him. Charles Russell frowned. That happened in real life too.

The full style and title of the Hemmingway Hospital was the Hemmingway Hospital for Nervous and Psychiatric Disorders. The word disorders had given the Ministry of Health a month of delicious indecision: diseases versus disorders – it was the sort of thing which an official was happy to minute about indefinitely, and

the file had been a good inch thick before the Minister himself, no less, had finally decided for disorders. ... Poor fellows, poor wretched men and women. You couldn't really say they were *diseased*, now could you? It didn't sound contemporary.

It was a remarkable building, or rather a collection of remarkable buildings. Its heart was a late Victorian mansion in considerable grounds which were now extremely valuable. It had been built by a successful merchant and his taste had been that of his time, a Ruskin Venetian with knobs on. To this Betjeman's delight had been added wings in the glass and concrete manner of a City re-development. Sensitives shuddered, and the establishment cost the taxpayer an annual fortune. There were two opinions whether it was worth it. Psychiatrists, whom it employed extravagantly, were understandably enthusiastic, but family doctors in solid practices had discreet reservations. Doctors who worked in slums would rather not hear about the Hemmingway at all. With a tenth of its annual budget they could have done something useful.

To this monument to a pseudo-science the ambulance had taken Alexander Gorjan, and for an instant in the small hours he had recovered consciousness. He looked round the little room, trying to focus it. Instinct told him he was in a hospital, but the room was more luxurious than any hospital he'd known. He wasn't in pain and he found he could think. A little and loosely, but he could think. He couldn't remember. There's been a journey by air from the Confederate Republic, a delay and a lot of pain, then a car and people talking. ... He gave it up. Clearly they'd drugged him and a good thing too. He'd been right at his limit and he must have gone over it. Otherwise why the hospital? This had happened to him before and he'd always lived. And this seemed a good sort of hospital. There was a nurse on duty, standing by the window, and she had just pulled a curtain back, peeping out from behind it. The curtain was white but the nurse was black.

For an instant his terror returned. Not long ago – he couldn't remember – he had thought he was going blind: now his eyes were again betraying him. He shut them a moment, mastering his fear, then he looked at the nurse again. ... But of course she was black – negresses were. He'd heard there were thousands in England. The English had freed their colonies but black men and brown came swarming into England still. Where of course they'd do the

dirty work, of course they'd be exploited. He'd been reading about the scandal in the Confederacy's newspapers. Capitalist exploitation. Not that this nurse looked notably exploited. She was a buxom creature, obviously well fed. The girl was really handsome – black but comely. ... Now where had that bubbled up from? Some book, he supposed, some novel he'd read at Cambridge. He sighed as the drug bit again, and slept.

The nurse hadn't noticed that for a moment he had been conscious. She had been knitting quietly and had risen on an instinct which she wouldn't have admitted. Once, in another life, her mother had taken her out at midnight. They had driven in a jalopy, out of the town, the tarred roads fading into tracks, then into jungle. They had left the car but her mother had known the way. Later a man had met them and her mother had said something in a dialect she didn't understand. She had felt it then, long before the drums began, excitement and something more. The something more was danger.

A month or two later the Baptists had got her. She had gone to the Mission school.

The nurse peeped from the window. In the garden outside it was very dark. And that was all. She shivered but sat down again. She wasn't at ease still.

The grounds behind the Hemmingway, like the heart of the hospital, were laid out in the taste of the nineties, a scrubby wood round the perimeter, then, working inwards, a well-attended lawn. After that came a belt of shrubs backing on to a wide gravel terrace. The wall of the house rose sheer from the gravel. Once there had been flower beds to divide the two, now there was only gravel.

Two men were lying in the shrubbery, talking quietly in a foreign tongue. One pointed at a light from a feyly gothic window.

'You think he's in there?'

'There isn't another light. In any case, once we get in –'

'We can't go playing hide and seek – not round a dozen wards.'

'This won't be a ward. The wards will be in the new part. This is for V.I.P.s.'

'Or resident staff?'

The other considered, then shrugged. 'We haven't a better bet,'

he said. 'What's more there's that drainpipe. Three floors to go, though. Come.'

They moved across the gravel silently, testing the drainpipe, beginning to climb expertly, and two more men in the shrubbery's shadow nodded approval. They waited till the climbers were half way up, then they moved with an equal silence. At the bottom of the drainpipe Copeman spoke.

'Keep your hands on that pipe.'

The climbers looked down at the two steady guns. One was on each of them.

'You at the top - throw down your gun to me. Move only one hand and throw so I can catch it.'

There was an instant's hesitation.

'You're monkeys on a stick, you know. You're sitters.'

In the glow from the window a pistol glinted suddenly. Copeman caught it neatly, glancing at it and shrugging. He put it in his pocket.

'Now you at the bottom.'

He caught the second pistol too.

'Come down please - gently, gently.'

They came down gently, gently, standing against the wall. They faced the guns silently.

'Now do as you're told. You're coming with us.'

One of the men against the wall said something to the other. Copeman didn't understand him but he caught his tone.

'I wouldn't try anything foolish like a break for it. We've serious weapons here, not what you read about in Sunday-paper supplements. Forty-five calibre. We don't have to go for fancy shooting. We've only to wing you and you won't get up.'

The taller of the two against the wall spoke first. 'And where are you taking us?'

'You'll soon find out.'