

O n t h e U p a n d U p

A shrewd MI5 officer once minuted a paper: "This case is of the highest possible importance and must therefore be handled on the lowest possible level." During the two or three weeks of Cowgill's absence in the United States, when I sat in his chair, I had good cause to reflect on that dictum. It was not an auspicious introduction to the higher levels. Most of the routine work was relatively simple. The other heads of sub-sections seemed well on top of their intelligence problems, and required little guidance from me. But when I turned to Cowgill's own work, I ran straight into a horrible muddle, which proved an object lesson on the malign influence of office politics on intelligence. It was a foretaste of headaches to come, and is therefore worth notice in some detail.

Some weeks before his departure, Cowgill had summoned a special meeting of his sub-section heads. He informed us that he was working on a case in con-

junction with Claude Dansey. The case was of great potential importance, with such marked political overtones that he proposed to go on handling it in person. But he thought that we should know the general outline, in case our own work threw up anything which might have a bearing on it. The outline given us by Cowgill was exceedingly blurred. He was obviously tired and rambled on without making much sense. It appeared that some hostile service was preparing, or had prepared, a gigantic plant. The nature and purpose of the plant was obscure. "My own view," Cowgill concluded with a sudden flash of life, "is that it has something to do with the Arabs. Wherever I look in this case, I see Arabs!" Richard Hannay¹ was with us again.

In an hour or two I had forgotten all about the case, but Cowgill reminded me of it when briefing me immediately before his departure. From his private safe he produced a fat file, and handed it over. He asked me to go into it during his absence and "see what I made of it." I was told that it would be advisable to keep in touch with Dansey, as he was taking a personal interest in the matter. I thought it better not to ask why Cowgill was hand-in-glove with Dansey in relation to the case, though the connection was puzzling in view of Dansey's contempt of counter-espionage and all its works. I guessed that the battle-scarred Cowgill was beginning to feel lonely, and that even Dansey might prove an acceptable ally. Perhaps they were ganging up against Vivian and MI5, a combina-

¹ A fictional detective in John Buchan's novels.—*Eds.*

tion that would have made sense in terms of office politics. When I opened the file, Dansey's interest immediately became clear, and I read on with increasing relish. It will be simpler for the reader if I tell the story in chronological order, not in the order which emerged from the file. Indeed, it took me a long time to unravel the essential threads.

By the end of 1943, it was clear that the Axis was headed for defeat, and many Germans began to have second thoughts about their loyalty to Hitler. As a result, a steady trickle of defectors began to appear at the gates of Allied missions with offers of assistance and requests for asylum. These offers and requests had to be treated with care for a number of good reasons. Himmler could have sent us a spy disguised as a defector. It would have been dangerous for the Russians to think that we were dickering with Germans; the air was opaque with mutual suspicions of separate peace feelers. We could not encourage a flood of last-minute converts hoping to escape the war tribunals. There were strict standing instructions to British missions that no assurances should be given to any German without prior reference to London. One day, a German presented himself at the British Legation in Berne, Switzerland, and asked to see the British Military Attache. He explained that he was an official of the German Foreign Ministry, and had brought with him from Berlin a suit-case full of Foreign Ministry documents. On hearing this staggering claim, the Attache promptly threw him out. The German's sub-

sequent attempts to see the Head of Chancery were likewise rebuffed. The attitude of the British officials cannot be condemned out of hand. It was barely credible that anyone would have the nerve to pass through the German frontier controls with a suit-case containing contraband official paper.

The German, however, was determined to get results. Having failed at the British Legation, he tried the Americans. Their regulations, it seemed, were more flexible than those of the British. A Legation Secretary, deciding that this was cloak-and-dagger stuff, told the visitor that he should address himself to Mr. Allen Dulles—"four doors down on the left." Dulles, who was then head of the OSS office in Switzerland, heard the stranger's story, and sensibly asked to see the contents of the suit-case. Without hesitation, he decided that the goods were genuine. They shocked him into a lyrical state which was still on him when he drafted his official report to Washington. "If only," he wrote, "you could see these documents in all their pristine freshness!"

The documents were copied and sent to Washington, and OSS loyally made them available to SIS. Because of the Swiss angle, they were sent in the first place to Dansey. I have already explained that Dansey had taken a personal interest in Switzerland since before the war. That interest had become a fierce proprietary obsession. He had resented the installation of OSS in Switzerland, and had lost no opportunity of belittling Dulles' work. The sight of the Berlin papers must have been a severe shock to him; so much was evident from his recorded comments. But Dansey

seldom stayed shocked for long. It was clearly impossible that Dulles should have pulled off this spectacular scoop under his nose. Therefore, he had not. The stuff was obviously a plant, and Dulles had fallen for it like a ton of bricks-

Plants involved operations by hostile intelligence services, and were a matter for the counter-espionage section. Dansey accordingly asked Cowgill to discuss the matter with him. What passed at their meeting was not recorded in detail. But it is evident that Cowgill left under the impression that it was to his interest to prove the spurious nature of Dulles's documents. It is also clear that he never studied the documents, then or thereafter. He was too busy and too tired. It was office politics that prompted him to play Dansey's game. His estrangement from Vivian was almost complete. His relations with the Chief, though still reasonably good, were not nearly so close as he would have wished. But Dansey's were very close indeed. By doing Dansey a good turn, by proving that Dulles had been sold a pup, he could also do himself a power of good.

Such was the picture that emerged from the messy Dansey-Cowgill correspondence. It made me think hard. About this time, a project was forming in my mind which needed a cautious approach. I was very anxious to get a certain job that would soon become available, and I could not afford to antagonise any of the people who might help me towards it. Cowgill, Vivian, Dansey, MI5, the Foreign Office, the Chief—they were all pieces of the jig-saw, and it was exceedingly difficult, from my comparatively lowly position, to see how they would fit when the moment came

for action on my part. I had, however, long since reached the conclusion that, although political manoeuvre can produce quick results, those results are lasting only if they are based on solid and conscientious work. I therefore decided to study the Dulles material on its merits. If it was unequivocally genuine or spurious, I would say so. If the outcome of my study was inconclusive, I would then reconsider the political aspects of the affair before deciding on which side to throw my own weight.

The great majority of the documents purported to be telegrams received by the German Foreign Office from its missions abroad. The obvious first step was to check with our cryptographic experts whether they had already received intercepted messages matching the Dulles material. There was no evidence in the file that this elementary step had been taken; Dansey and Cowgill had contented themselves with skimming the paper cursorily in the search for implausibilities and contradictions to buttress their advocacy of the plant theory. I remembered Cowgill's instructions to keep in close contact with Dansey, and debated whether to consult him on the desirability of approaching the cryptographers. I was against it, as I thought that he would probably oppose the suggestion. When I found on re-checking the file that Dansey had minuted to Cowgill: "Passed to you for any action you may think necessary," I decided that I was well enough covered to go ahead on my own.

By that time, the Government Code & Cypher School, our cryptographic organisation, had been virtually split into two departments. One, under Com-

mander Travis, dealt with all service traffic; the other, under Commander Denniston, handled diplomatic messages. As the Dulles material was German Foreign Office correspondence, Denniston was my man. I chose for his scrutiny a striking series of telegrams from the German Military Attache in Tokyo to the German General Staff which had been transmitted through diplomatic channels. They contained detailed statements of the Japanese Order of Battle and assessments of future Japanese intentions. There were about a dozen in all and, if genuine, they were clearly of the highest importance.

Two days later, Denniston telephoned me in a state of some excitement. He told me that three of my telegrams exactly matched intercepted telegrams which they had already decyphered, and that the others were proving of the utmost value to his cryptographers in their breakdown of the German diplomatic code. Could I get him some more? I could indeed, and began to feed the stuff in to Denniston as fast as he could absorb it. When about a third of the material had passed through his hands with a steadily increasing tally of matches, and never a suggestion of anything phony, I felt that I had no choice but to circulate the documents as genuine. Accordingly, I passed them on to our sections dealing with the sendee departments and the Foreign Office, purposely playing down their significance, as I did not wish Dansey to get premature wind of anything unusual.

The reaction from the service departments was immediate. Army, Navy, and Air Force—all three howled for more. The Foreign Office was more sedate, but also

very polite. I asked the sections concerned to get written evaluations of the material from their departments. I also asked Denniston for a minute explaining the cryptographic reasons for supposing the documents to be genuine. I needed all the ammunition I could get for the inevitable and imminent confrontation with Dansey. Fortunately, enough accumulated for me to take action before Dansey heard of the affair from any other source. I thought of sending him the papers to prepare him for the shock, but rejected the idea on the grounds that he would not read them. So, with some trepidation, I asked when I could conveniently pay him a visit.

The visit lasted a very uncomfortable half-hour. As was to be expected, Dansey was furious. But he was sobered by the fact that I had studied the material and he had not. Denniston's minute deflated him a little. He did not understand the argument, but the conclusion was plainly stated. Anger mounted in him again as he read the eulogistic comments of the departments. He composed himself with some difficulty to read me a lecture. Even if the documents were genuine, what of it? I was encouraging OSS to run riot all over Switzerland, fouling up the whole intelligence field. Heaven knew what damage they wouldn't do. Such matters had to be handled only by officers with experience of the pitfalls that beset the unwary. For all he knew, OSS, if egged on in this way, could blow the whole of his network in a matter of days.

When Dansey had exhausted his reckless improvisation, I asked him with puzzled deference how OSS came into the business at all. I had not circulated the

material as OSS material. Not even our own circulating sections, let alone the departments, knew that OSS were involved. They regarded it as *our* stuff, they were asking *us* for more. It seemed that the credit would be ours. When I faltered to an end, Dansey gave me a long, long stare. "Carry on," he said at last. "You're not such a fool as I thought." When Cowgill returned, I took him the file and explained what I had done. To his immediate anxious enquiry about Dansey's attitude, I explained that I had consulted him and that he had approved my action. With relief, Cowgill handed me back the file and asked me to handle any sequel. To my surprise, the case was by no means closed. Our German friend proved to be an intrepid operator, and paid several more visits to Berne with his useful suit-case.

Meanwhile, the work of my sub-sections dealing with German activity in the Iberian peninsula, North Africa, and Italy, was going smoothly owing to an increasingly easy familiarity with the subject. German agents were picked up with monotonous regularity and, so far as I know, nothing of any importance escaped our net. Although the German services were accorded full facilities by the Spanish Government and Dr. Salazar offered them amiable hospitality, precious few Spaniards or Portuguese showed willingness to stick out their necks for Fascism. Many of those who accepted missions did so simply to get out of Europe or into Britain, or both. Besides, we held the master key to German intentions in regular perusal of their signals.

The case of Ernesto Simoes may be taken as a

representative example. We learnt from the German signals that they had recruited Simoes in Lisbon for service in England. His instructions were given to him in the form of microdots scattered about his clothing; his communications were to be by mail. After consultation with MI5, it was decided to allow him to run loose in England for a bit, in the hope that he might lead us to other German agents. He was therefore unmolested on his arrival, and was even given discreet assistance in finding employment in a Luton factory making parts for aircraft. The information he might have obtained there was just interesting enough to tempt a spy, without entailing much danger if anything had slipped back to the Germans by mistake. He was lodged with a married couple; the husband worked in the same factory. Arrangements were made for his movements to be watched and his mail checked.

Within a few days, Simoes settled down to a pattern of behaviour which he never subsequently varied. He would follow his landlord out of the factory when the whistle blew, and see him safely into the nearest pub. He would then hum' home as fast as his legs would carry him. He never emerged until the following morning when he accompanied his landlord to Work. It only remained to establish the purpose of his haste to get home. On closer investigation, there emerged a wholly satisfactory explanation. Every evening, on reaching his lodging, he promptly laid his landlady under (so the clandestine watchers improbably maintained) the kitchen table. He would then eat a hearty meal and go to bed.

After a few weeks, it was decided that the comedy should be stopped. Simoes was pulled in. So as to leave nothing to chance, he was taken to the "tough" interrogation centre on Ham Common, where Tommy Harris was let loose on him. It was beyond Harris to be really tough with anyone, but he did his best. He told Simoes that he was in a British secret service prison; he was beyond the reach of the law; his Consulate knew nothing of his whereabouts and would never find out; he might stay there for life, if he was allowed to live; he could be starved, beaten, killed, and no one would ever know. His only hope was a complete confession of his espionage for the Germans. And much of the same sort, with Harris's riotous imagination running the whole gamut. Indeed, Harris confessed to me later that he had painted such a blood-curdling picture that he had begun to frighten himself.

To all of this, Simoes listened with mounting impatience, merely saying testily at intervals that he was hungry and wanted something to eat. After an hour or so, however, he reached a decision. Calling for paper and pen, he scratched out a two-page account of his contacts with the Germans in Lisbon, including his instructions, microdots and all. He explained that he had not had the slightest intention of doing anything that might endanger himself; his only aim had been to earn good wages in wartime England which he could not have reached unaided. Harris saw that Simoes's account squared in every detail with our previous knowledge. Before he could say anything,

Simoes flung his pen down. "And now," he asked beligerently, "can I have something to eat?"

Another case involving a Portuguese is of some interest in that it illustrates the trickiness of taking action on information derived from particularly delicate sources. Rogerio Peixoto de Menezes, a clerk in the Portuguese Foreign Office, was posted for service in the Portuguese Embassy in London. Before he left Lisbon, we learnt, again from German signals, that the Abwehr had recruited him. He was given general intelligence assignments, and was told to communicate by secret-ink letters, sent through the Portuguese bag to cover-addresses in Lisbon. This presented little difficulty, since the Portuguese bag was regularly opened before it left England. Sure enough, within a few weeks, an envelope addressed to one of Menezes's cover-addresses was extracted from the bag and, on development, found to contain a message in a simple secret ink. It commented fatuously on public morale, reported the existence of anti-aircraft batteries in Hyde Park, and contained other trivia. It was felt, however, that even a poor fish like Menezes might one day stumble on something important, and that his activity should be stopped.

The difficulty was that Menezes might take refuge behind diplomatic immunity, and it was therefore necessary to induce Senhor Monteiro, the Portuguese Ambassador, to waive any such claim. Yet the only evidence of Menezes's misconduct had been obtained by undiplomatic means. It was finally decided that Monteiro should be shown the letter, with the ex-

planation that it had been passed to us by a contact in Lisbon. When confronted with the letter, Monteiro could scarcely have persisted in claiming immunity for Menezes, and the latter was duly brought to trial. It was obviously a pathetic case, and some of us had qualms before the verdict was pronounced; technically, the accused was liable to the death penalty. Happily, the judge was lenient; we had no reason to annoy the Portuguese. But the case ended with a nasty jolt. In a coded telegram commenting on the case (which we also read), Monteiro gave our explanation of the circumstances in which the letter had reached us. Having done so, he expressed the possibility that the diplomatic bag had been "indiscreet."

The existence of neutral diplomats was a lasting embarrassment to the British security authorities. The problem was brought to their attention early by the Duke of Alba, the Ambassador of Spain. We had regular access to the Spanish diplomatic bag, and from it learnt that Alba periodically sent to Madrid despatches on the British political scene of quite exceptional quality. As we had no doubt that the Spanish Foreign Ministry would make them available to their German allies, these despatches represented a really serious leakage. Yet there was nothing that could be done. There was no evidence that the Duke had obtained his information improperly. He simply moved with people in the know and reported what they said, with shrewd commentaries of his own. For some time, MI5 toyed with the idea of using him as a channel for deception. But his informants were just too high up. They included such people as Brendan

Bracken, Beaverbrook, even Churchill himself; they could scarcely stoop to trickery with a grandee of Spain. So there we had to leave it, cherishing a single hope. Alba's reports maintained a tone wholly friendly to Britain. It was possible that Hitler would dismiss him as an incurable Anglophile. After all, he was Duke of Berwick, too.