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Opening Extract from...

The Spy Who Came in from the Cold

Written by John Le Carré

Published by Penguin Classics

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I

Checkpoint

The American handed Leamas another cup of coffee and said, 'Why don't you go back and sleep? We can ring you if he shows up.'

Leamas said nothing, just stared through the window of the checkpoint, along the empty street.

'You can't wait for ever, sir. Maybe he'll come some other time. We can have the polizei contact the Agency: you can be back here in twenty minutes.'

'No,' said Leamas, 'it's nearly dark now.'

'But you can't wait for ever; he's nine hours over schedule.'

'If you want to go, go. You've been very good,' Leamas added. 'I'll tell Kramer you've been damn good.'

'But how long will you wait?'

'Until he comes.' Leamas walked to the observation window and stood between the two motionless policemen. Their binoculars were trained on the Eastern checkpoint.

'He's waiting for the dark,' Leamas muttered. 'I know he is.'

'This morning you said he'd come across with the workmen.'

Leamas turned on him.

'Agents aren't aeroplanes. They don't have schedules. He's

blown, he's on the run, he's frightened. Mundt's after him, now, at this moment. He's only got one chance. Let him choose his time.'

The younger man hesitated, wanting to go and not finding the moment.

A bell rang inside the hut. They waited, suddenly alert. A policeman said in German, 'Black Opel Rekord, Federal registration.'

'He can't see that far in the dusk, he's guessing,' the American whispered and then he added: 'How did Mundt know?'

'Shut up,' said Leamas from the window. One of the policemen left the hut and walked to the sandbag emplacement two feet short of the white demarcation which lay across the road like the base line of a tennis court. The other waited until his companion was crouched behind the telescope in the emplacement, then put down his binoculars, took his black helmet from the peg by the door and carefully adjusted it on his head. Somewhere high above the checkpoint the arclights sprang to life, casting theatrical beams on to the road in front of them.

The policeman began his commentary. Leamas knew it by heart.

'Car halts at the first control. Only one occupant, a woman. Escorted to the Vopo hut for document check.' They waited in silence.

'What's he saying?' said the American. Leamas didn't reply. Picking up a spare pair of binoculars, he gazed fixedly towards the East German controls.

'Document check completed. Admitted to the second control.'

‘Mr Leamas, is this your man?’ the American persisted. ‘I ought to ring the Agency.’

‘Wait.’

‘Where’s the car now? What’s it doing?’

‘Currency check, Customs,’ Leamas snapped.

Leamas watched the car. There were two Vopos at the driver’s door, one doing the talking, the other standing off, waiting. A third was sauntering round the car. He stopped at the boot, then walked back to the driver. He wanted the key. He opened the boot, looked inside, closed it, returned the key and walked thirty yards up the road to where, midway between the two opposing checkpoints, a solitary East German sentry was standing, a squat silhouette in boots and baggy trousers. The two stood together talking, self-conscious in the glare of the arlight.

With a perfunctory gesture they waved the car on. It reached the two sentries in the middle of the road and stopped again. They walked round the car, stood off and talked again; finally, almost unwillingly, they let it continue across the line to the Western sector.

‘It is a man you’re waiting for, Mr Leamas?’ asked the American.

‘Yes, it’s a man.’

Pushing up the collar of his jacket, Leamas stepped outside into the icy October wind. He remembered the crowd then. It was something you forgot inside the hut, this group of puzzled faces. The people changed but the expressions were the same. It was like the helpless crowd that gathers round in a traffic accident, no one knowing how it happened, whether you should move the body. Smoke or dust rose

through the beam of the arclamps, a constant shifting pall between the margins of light.

Leamas walked over to the car, and said to the woman, 'Where is he?'

'They came for him and he ran. He took the bicycle. They can't have known about me.'

'Where did he go?'

'We had a room near Brandenburg, over a pub. He kept a few things there, money, papers. I think he'll have gone there. Then he'll come over.'

'Tonight?'

'He said he would come tonight. The others have all been caught – Paul, Viereck, Ländser, Salomon. He hasn't got long.'

Leamas stared at her for a moment in silence.

'Ländser too?'

'Last night.'

A policeman was standing at Leamas' side.

'You'll have to move away from here,' he said. 'It's forbidden to obstruct the crossing point.'

Leamas half turned.

'Go to hell,' he snapped. The German stiffened, but the woman said:

'Get in. We'll drive down to the corner.'

He got in beside her and they moved slowly down the road to a side turning.

'I didn't know you had a car,' he said.

'It's my husband's,' she replied indifferently. 'Karl never told you I was married, did he?' Leamas was silent. 'My husband and I work for an optical firm. They let us over to do business. Karl only told you my maiden name. He didn't want me to be mixed up with . . . you.'

Leamas took a key from his pocket.

'You'll want somewhere to stay,' he said. His voice sounded flat. 'There's an apartment in the Albrecht-Dürer-Strasse, next to the Museum. Number 28A. You'll find everything you want. I'll telephone you when he comes.'

'I'll stay here with you.'

'I'm not staying here. Go to the flat. I'll ring you. There's no point in waiting here now.'

'But he's coming to this crossing point.'

Leamas looked at her in surprise.

'He told you that?'

'Yes. He knows one of the Vopos there, the son of his landlord. It may help. That's why he chose this route.'

'And he told *you* that?'

'He trusts me. He told me everything.'

'Christ.'

He gave her the key and went back to the checkpoint hut, out of the cold. The policemen were muttering to each other as he entered; the larger one ostentatiously turned his back.

'I'm sorry,' said Leamas. 'I'm sorry I bawled you out.' He opened a tattered briefcase and rummaged in it until he found what he was looking for: a half-bottle of whisky. With a nod the elder man accepted it, half filled each coffee mug and topped them up with black coffee.

'Where's the American gone?' asked Leamas.

'Who?'

'The CIA boy. The one who was with me.'

'Bed time,' said the elder man and they all laughed.

Leamas put down his mug and said:

'What are your rules for shooting to protect a man coming over? A man on the run.'

'We can only give covering fire if the Vopos shoot into our sector.'

'That means you can't shoot until a man's over the boundary?'

The older man said, 'We can't give covering fire, Mr . . .'

'Thomas,' Leamas replied, 'Thomas.' They shook hands, the two policemen pronouncing their own names as they did so.

'We can't give covering fire. That's the truth. They tell us there'd be war if we did.'

'It's nonsense,' said the younger policeman, emboldened by the whisky. 'If the Allies weren't here the Wall would be gone by now.'

'So would Berlin,' muttered the elder man.

'I've got a man coming over tonight,' said Leamas abruptly.

'Here? At this crossing point?'

'It's worth a lot to get him out. Mundt's men are looking for him.'

'There are still places where you can climb,' said the younger policeman.

'He's not that kind. He'll bluff his way through; he's got papers, if the papers are still good. He's got a bicycle.'

There was only one light in the checkpoint, a reading lamp with a green shade, but the glow of the arclights, like artificial moonlight, filled the cabin. Darkness had fallen, and with it silence. They spoke as if they were afraid of being overheard. Leamas went to the window and waited. In front of him the road and to either side the Wall, a dirty, ugly thing of breeze blocks and strands of barbed wire, lit with cheap yellow light, like the backdrop for a concentration camp.

East and west of the Wall lay the unrestored part of Berlin, a half-world of ruin, drawn in two dimensions, crags of war.

That damned woman, thought Leamas, and that fool Karl who'd lied about her. Lied by omission, as they all do, agents the world over. You teach them to cheat, to cover their tracks, and they cheat you as well. He'd only produced her once, after that dinner in the Schürzstrasse last year. Karl had just had his big scoop and Control had wanted to meet him. Control always came in on success. They'd had dinner together – Leamas, Control and Karl. Karl loved that kind of thing. He turned up looking like a Sunday School boy, scrubbed and shining, doffing his hat and all respectful. Control had shaken his hand for five minutes and said: 'I want you to know how pleased we are, Karl, damn pleased.' Leamas had watched and thought, that'll cost us another couple of hundred a year. When they'd finished dinner Control pumped their hands again, nodded significantly and implying that he had to go off and risk his life somewhere else, got back into his chauffeur-driven car. Then Karl had laughed, and Leamas had laughed with him, and they'd finished the champagne, still laughing about Control. Afterwards they'd gone to the 'Alter Fass'; Karl had insisted on it and there Elvira was waiting for them, a forty-year-old blonde, tough as nails.

'This is my best-kept secret, Alec,' Karl had said, and Leamas was furious. Afterwards they'd had a row.

'How much does she know? Who is she? How did you meet her?' Karl sulked and refused to say. After that things went badly. Leamas tried to alter the routine, change the meeting places and the catch words, but Karl didn't like it. He knew what lay behind it and he didn't like it.

'If you don't trust her it's too late anyway,' he'd said, and

Leamas took the hint and shut up. But he went carefully after that, told Karl much less, used more of the hocus-pocus of espionage technique. And there she was, out there in her car, knowing everything, the whole network, the safe house, everything; and Leamas swore, not for the first time, never to trust an agent again.

He went to the telephone and dialled the number of his flat. Frau Martha answered.

‘We’ve got guests at the Dürer-Strasse,’ said Leamas, ‘a man and a woman.’

‘Married?’ asked Martha.

‘Near enough,’ said Leamas, and she laughed that frightful laugh. As he put down the receiver one of the policemen turned to him.

‘Herr Thomas! Quick!’ Leamas stepped to the observation window.

‘A man, Herr Thomas,’ the younger policeman whispered, ‘with a bicycle.’ Leamas picked up the binoculars.

It was Karl, the figure was unmistakable even at that distance, shrouded in an old Wehrmacht macintosh, pushing his bicycle. He’s made it, thought Leamas, he must have made it, he’s through the document check, only currency and Customs to go. Leamas watched Karl lean his bicycle against the railing, walk casually to the Customs hut. Don’t overdo it, he thought. At last Karl came out, waved cheerfully to the man on the barrier, and the red and white pole swung slowly upwards. He was through, he was coming towards them, he had made it. Only the Vopo in the middle of the road, the line and safety.

At that moment Karl seemed to hear some sound, sense danger; he glanced over his shoulder, began to pedal furiously.

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ously, bending low over the handlebars. There was still the lonely sentry on the bridge, and he had turned and was watching Karl. Then, totally unexpected, the searchlights went on, white and brilliant, catching Karl and holding him in their beam like a rabbit in the headlights of a car. There came the see-saw wail of a siren, the sound of orders wildly shouted. In front of Leamas the two policemen dropped to their knees, peering through the sandbagged slits, deftly flicking the rapid load on their automatic rifles.

The East German sentry fired, quite carefully, away from them, into his own sector. The first shot seemed to thrust Karl forward, the second to pull him back. Somehow he was still moving, still on the bicycle, passing the sentry, and the sentry was still shooting at him. Then he sagged, rolled to the ground, and they heard quite clearly the clatter of the bike as it fell. Leamas hoped to God he was dead.