

ONE

When Lucas began his exile in Britain he wrote to the Queen: *'My dear Elizabeth, I trust you are well. May I come to see you? It would be a solace to know that I had a sympathetic friend with whom I could recall happier occasions.'*

One of the Queen's secretaries replied: *'Her Majesty commands me to thank you for your letter and to say that she is in good health. The Queen hopes your stay in this country will be a pleasant one. She is unable to grant you an appointment to see her.'*

Lucas wrote to the prime minister: *'Relations between our countries have always been amiable. I should like to make use of the time I find I now have at my disposal to consider ways in which this relationship could be further strengthened. It would be helpful if, as a prologue to such considerations, we could meet. How about a working lunch?'*

Next day he wrote to the foreign secretary: *'I am attaching a copy of a letter I wrote to the prime minister, whom I now understand from a newspaper report is out of the country. I should be honoured if you would accept my invitation instead.'*

Three days later Lucas had a telephone call asking him to come to the Foreign Office. The young man who interviewed him there said, 'You've got to stop writing these stupid letters.'

'Is that the way you usually address a Head of State?'

'My message to you is that you are an embarrassment to Her Britannic Majesty's government.'

'I should like to speak to your superior.'

'No chance. And he's a lot ruder than I am.'

Lucas took his distressing experience of British diplomacy to the American Embassy. He had been an American protégé until he was deposed.

'Not surprised a bit,' said the man at the embassy who dealt with former protégés. 'Youngish fellow? Gucci loafers, yellow tie?'

'Australian accent.'

'A New Zealander. The Kiwis just don't care.'

'Should I complain?'

'If you must.'

'Will it do any good?'

'No.'

'Will you do it for me?'

'No.'

'You're talking like the Brits.'

'But politer.'

'Am I expected to be pleased?'

'Count your blessings. Count your money. Always a consolation, I'd have thought.' He smiled. Lucas did not smile back.

'I want some work to do.'

'Ah, work.'

The American selected a pipe from a rack on his desk, and sucked at it. He was not a smoker. He put his feet on his desk and gave an impression of thought. What sort of work did you find for a former dictator?

'A little lecturing, perhaps,' the American said. 'I have an aunt back home who runs a circuit. She might know someone here. Have to keep politics out of it, of course. Give us a sight of your notes. No reminiscences about dear Queen Elizabeth.' The American was already losing enthusiasm for the idea. 'What about some study? The Brits run a thing called the Open University.'

'Why don't I just read a good book?'

'Don't get shirty, Lucas.'

Lucas got up. 'Have a nice day.'

'Sure. Look, Lucas, let me think about this. Keep in touch.'

Lucas had already left the room. He returned to Claridges. The doorman saluted him as his car drew up. A signal went through the hotel so that a lift was waiting to take him to his suite. He waved the liftman aside and walked up the stairs. Anyone, however ordinary, could buy servility. Lucas hated feeling ordinary. He asked himself why he was living in a hotel. A president in exile should have something more established than a bed hired by the day. The following week he moved into an apartment in the district of central London known as St James's. This was one of the places in London that Lucas had heard of. While president, he had appointed a number of ambassadors to London and they had been accredited to the Court of St James.

'Is the court near here?' he asked the man from the estate agency who showed him the apartment.

'The court, sir?'

'Of St James.'

'I don't believe there is one, sir, as such.'

'No Court of St James?'

'I believe it is an historical concept.'

'It is where ambassadors present their credentials.'

'At Buckingham Palace, I believe, sir. You can see the roof of the palace from here. Beyond the trees. Heavenly view.' He waved in the direction of the sky.

'The court is really at the palace?'

'In a manner of speaking, sir.'

'How puzzling.'

'It is one of our funny ways, sir. Not uncharming when you think about it.'

The man from the estate agency was young, polite, neatly dressed and confident. He sold himself as ably as he sold his properties. He would be a guide in a new land.

'Would you like to work for me?'

‘That’s extremely flattering, sir.’

‘You mean, no?’

‘Perhaps you should not ask me, sir.’

So polite. Yet it was a rebuff, another humiliation, as complete as had been the rebuffs from the Queen, the Foreign Office and the Americans. He chided himself for having asked. But he missed having people around him. The entourage who had been glad to accompany him to safety in America had preferred to stay there when he moved on to Britain. He did not want to return to America, and America would probably not want him back. It did not warm towards losers. Where else to go? The world seemed puzzlingly small to a former dictator looking for a home. Latin America seemed eternally unstable. Africa was a sink. Australia was soft. Singapore was hard. Lucas had turned to mother Europe, with its antique ways and sublime tastes. Britain, the almost European country, offered an insular feeling of security. He was safe but he was bored, and he was snubbed. Creatures such as the serf at the Foreign Office, that lackey, that insect to be crushed, dared to treat him as a pariah.

Lucas told himself he would not forget. But he was an intelligent man. For the present at least, he was powerless. His American protectors had cynically withdrawn their support, preferring the upstart who had deposed him. Each day Lucas had lengthy phone calls to those few of his former lieutenants who had remained behind and who said they remained loyal to him. He told them how to deal with the new government, and, most important, how to sustain the morale of his supporters. How many in today’s demonstration? Ten thousand. Possibly twenty thousand. What is ‘possibly’? Who counted them?

It was a testing time for Lucas, trying to maintain his authority over several thousand miles through a satellite link that tended to fade and might be bugged by the enemy. For the first time in his career he had to assume that his underlings were trustworthy, although it was more than probable that they were not,

exaggerating the amount of support for him, assuming that this was what he wanted to hear. Or they may have gone over to the enemy, paying their acceptance fee by playing the traitor to him. He longed to know what had happened to his palace, his home for years and from which he had to flee like a debtor escaping from a bailiff. But he could not bring himself to show weakness by asking for what might be called trivial information. And if the information were truthfully given it would be a penance to hear: of drawers rummaged and intimate letters read, wardrobes ransacked by souvenir hunters, the whole place put on show to the mob, even his grandchildren's toys. A family's life pried into and scoffed at.

By comparison, the troubles and responsibilities of Lucas's fellow countrymen in exile seemed minimal. There were in London, he had discovered, a surprising number of his countrymen and countrywomen. The word had got round that Lucas was in London too, and they came to see him. Some of their problems existed simply because they were abroad rather than at home. Most could be solved by the provision of an air ticket. Lucas usually directed them to their consulate but would occasionally, if he had been moved by a sad story, lend them the money. He never gave money away although he knew that the loans were unlikely to be returned. He could have transported the entire London community of his countrymen home in aeroplanes with mink-lined lavatories and hardly noticed the expense, but it would be a poor purchase. Only the frugal can seem to be generous. His advice tended to be earthly practical.

'But should we go home at all?'

'Of course you should.'

That was his answer to this question, always, to anyone, no matter who, no matter that they might be arrested the moment they arrived and jailed and maybe shot, perhaps deservedly, being agitators, thieves, murderers or miserable discontents. There was no other answer he could give. The questioners were either

fools, in which case they were going to get into trouble anyway, whatever answer he gave, or they were provocateurs, hoping to get him to say something unpleasant which would be reported back with slobbering embellishments to his detested successor as president; and probably reported as well to the Brits, who would send him a polite but frigid letter reminding him that one of the conditions of his residence in the United Kingdom was that he should say nothing, on any subject, at any time, to anyone under any circumstances.

The passage of apparently harmless visitors to his apartment may have made Lucas unusually careless about security: that and the feeling that came from living in a part of London regarded as safe. After all, the Queen herself was a near neighbour. The attempt on his life therefore came as a shock to Lucas, most of the shock being that he, the former president of a notoriously unsafe country, had allowed his defences to slip.

When the would-be assassin arrived, Lucas questioned him briefly through the video-phone that connected his apartment to the entrance to the building.

‘Courier, sir. Special delivery.’

The courier looked like one of Lucas’s countrymen, which should have aroused Lucas’s suspicion. A ‘special delivery’ from the new government would surely be connected with something sinister. A minute or two later the courier was at the front door of Lucas’s apartment. He was holding a parcel, about the size of a shoe box. He handed it to Lucas. It had his name on it, dignified by the appellation ‘His Eminence’.

‘Where are you from?’

‘Straight from the airport, sir.’

‘I mean, your home.’

The courier named a village.

‘When were you last there?’

‘Yesterday, sir.’

'You must be tired. Come in for a moment. I'll give you something for your trouble.'

Lucas went to a bureau drawer to find a tip. Momentarily, his back was towards the courier. When Lucas turned, the courier was close behind him holding a gun.

The courier said, 'I'm sorry to have to do this, sir.'