

1 - THE MAN IN MADRID

In politics anyone can lose office and suddenly become no-one or the person in charge can decide to turn a nobody into someone important with a single word. The problem is knowing who power emanates from, who is truly in charge. But in practice we all know that the person in charge is whoever is above us. This simple rule forms the base of a pyramid at the pinnacle of which sits someone higher than all the rest. For centuries, the king held the top position. Common folk believed power emanated from God and that He was the source of monarchs' power. So there were only two ways to replace them: wait for them to die or kill them. Fortunately, time had tempered the need for drastic solutions, although the king was obviously in charge as there was a people that obeyed him. Even so, recent events had shown this approach to be simplistic and the power of kings had diminished. But ministers, on the other hand, could easily be chopped and changed and their power was fleeting. One advantage they had was that there was no need to kill them. It sufficed to destroy them or force them to resign. And so was Europe at the end of the 18th century.

Alfred Gordon had reached a further conclusion: civil servants must follow set rules in performing their tasks. This judicious approach, tried and tested over time, avoids the disaster that would ensue if everything were dependent on the whim of a new minister. A minister is a moving machine and the civil servants are the system's gears. Inertia prevents the movement from grinding to a halt in the absence of ministerial orders.

So, at ten o'clock in the morning every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, not a single minute before and not a single minute later, Gordon invariably left his office. Breathing in to hide his barrel-like belly, he checked his stockings, tidied his cuffs and cleared his throat with a cough. Once he had completed this ceremony, which he had been repeating ever since 7 April 1790, the day he was made commissioner with responsibility for analysing intelligence gathering strategies, he headed off to the office of Sir Arthur Blum. He was the head of intelligence services at the Foreign Office with responsibility for the Mediterranean area, including Spain, France, Italy and North Africa.

But that morning, as he was tugging at his cuffs, Gordon got quite the fright.

'Ferguson! You startled me!'

'I was waiting for you. A very important matter has come up.'

'Important?' Gordon thought. Ferguson did not understand the

meaning of the word. Mrs Gordon said he was a well-educated young man but Gordon knew he owed his position at the Foreign Office to a certain lady who also appreciated him for his education... among other things. However, Gordon regarded that habit of hiding behind a pillar and jumping out at him just as he was arriving to be rather poor form.

‘Blum is waiting for me,’ said Gordon. ‘You can tell me all about it as we walk.’ Punctuality is a British virtue.

‘Andrew McFar arrived yesterday.’

Gordon slowed his pace and looked at Ferguson.

‘Wasn’t he in Madrid?’

‘He has fled the city. Captain John Lear is dead.’

‘What on Earth has happened?’ He stopped dead in his tracks.

For once Ferguson was right in his use of the word ‘important’.

‘A duel,’ Ferguson replied. ‘Some distant cousin of Godoy’s challenged the captain to defend his sister’s honour.’

‘That Lear was a damned fool!’ Gordon shook his head. ‘All that skirt-chasing... And a relative of Godoy’s to boot.’

‘It was not Captain Lear who was after the lady, it was McFar.’

‘So what did Lear have to do with all this?’

‘Her husband thought the captain was the offending party. But he is an invalid so the lady’s brother took his place and challenged him. So as it was British honour that was at stake... Lear...’

‘British honour? British balls!’ Gordon bellowed. ‘And I suppose Godoy knew the truth, ordered McFar’s arrest and he ran away.’

‘I suppose so. Let’s not forget the Spanish prime minister is... erm...’

‘Dangerous,’ Gordon finished his sentence for him.

‘That’s not what I was going to say,’ Ferguson complained.

He thought the Spaniards were... erm... He never could quite alight on the right adjective.

‘How would you describe a man who keeps the queen’s bed warm while running the country? Do you think he is a fool?’ Gordon smiled.

Ferguson tensed up. He too owed his job to the work he did between the sheets.

‘What shall I do with McFar?’ Ferguson asked.

Gordon looked him over. Poor Ferguson! He never knew what he had to do. Though he imagined that when he was in bed with his protectress something would spring to mind.

‘The problem is not knowing what to do with McFar but what we can do without him and Captain Lear.’

‘We have the ambassador and the second secretary, Albert Flint, in Madrid. The rest are just pawns.’

‘Flint is too well-known and the ambassador...’ mumbled Gordon, scratching his chin. Then he suddenly looked Ferguson straight in the eye. He had just remembered an important detail. ‘Was the offended wife the same lady Harry Berg was after?’

‘I’m afraid so, sir.’

Harry Berg had also fled Madrid after an affair with the same woman and had been placed under the command of Jack Smith who had the same position as Sir Arthur but with responsibility for Central Europe.

‘Three men in less than a year. She’ll finish off all of the empire’s agents by herself. Don’t our men in Spain realise cuckolding is no laughing matter?’ Then he lowered his voice, ‘Not like here,’ he added. Ferguson blushed a little. ‘That custom of duelling could turn out very costly to us. Didn’t they ban it?’

‘The Spanish police turn a blind eye. You know Spaniards. They are... erm...’

‘Yes, yes, I know,’ Gordon cut him off.

They had sent John Lear to Madrid a few months earlier when King Charles IV of Spain appointed Manuel de Godoy as Secretary of State. He had rapidly risen from being a mere cadet in the Guards to Lieutenant General of the army, a Grandee of Spain and Duke of Alcludia. And now they had no-one who carried much weight there. The ambassador did his job but there were things he could not do. John Lear had been free to come and go as he pleased.

It was terrible news. He had to think of something. And fast!

‘What shall I do with McFar?’ Ferguson asked again.

‘Get him to write a report on his years in Spain.’

‘Yes, sir. Shall I assign him a desk?’

Why did he have the misfortune to have to deal with such an idiot! It was a shame English blood was not as hot as Spanish blood. If only the cuckolded husband would challenge that imbecile to a duel and kill him! That would put an end to lots of Gordon’s problems.

‘Yes and give him paper, pen and ink,’ he said sarcastically and walked off leaving him standing there.

He walked quickly up the stairs to the floor above, to the realm of Lord Grenville, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, where Sir Arthur’s office was.

He went straight into the warren of offices leading to the intelligence department without asking permission, and greeted Harry, Sir Arthur’s private secretary, a slim man seated at a tiny desk, who

replied with a nod. Gordon knocked on the office door. He could only do this without Harry announcing him on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

Sir Arthur was sitting behind a dark wooden desk. His blue eyes furtively spied Gordon from beneath his blond eyebrows. Sir Arthur had ordered that both lamps be lit because the day was as grey as he was feeling right then.

‘Take a seat,’ he ordered, gesturing at the one in front of his desk while he kept on drafting a document without uttering another word. Gordon looked at Sir Arthur’s fingers, long and thin in keeping with the rest of his figure. The only thing that stood out in that body was the blond beard that hid lips that seemed painted with the finest of brushes, and the white wig, tied in a queue with black lace which covered up his baldness.

When Sir Arthur had finished writing, he rang the bell and Harry appeared, back bent and head bowed.

‘It’s for Secretary of State Grenville. Urgent delivery.’

Harry gave a bow, which the Secretary of State failed to notice, as Harry had been bent over from the moment he came in. He took the letter and left.

‘The end of this century is looking pretty rum,’ Sir Arthur complained. Gordon made no comment. It was the same old tune. ‘There is a stench of war,’ he said, picking up a document in front of him. ‘Listen to what it says here, “France has begun moving troops northward.” I was with Lord Grenville yesterday. He has been Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs for a year now and he told me we must make 1792 end better than it began. Things are getting a bit stirred up. The trouble in Ireland is stretching on. Austria and Prussia are still set on their own private war with France. It was certainly not a good idea for that Prussian general... what is his name?’

‘The Duke of Brunswick,’ Gordon reminded him.

‘That’s right, that duke.’ He thanked Sir Arthur and went on. ‘It was not right for that fool to threaten the Assembly with destroying Paris unless they returned Louis XVI to power...’

‘Leopold II is Queen Marie Antoinette’s brother and...’

‘Yes, yes, I know,’ Sir Arthur said raising his hand. He could not stand replies when he was giving one of his lectures. He found another document on the desk. Here is a copy of the Brunswick Manifesto, signed by Emperor Francis and Catherine of Russia. It was signed ten days ago. Look at the date. They are demanding that the French hand sovereignty back to the king. I wish they would do away with the National Assembly and bring Louis XVI back to power! And

in the midst of all this chaos will still do not know what Spain will do. Aranda has only been in power a very short time and still has not taken any important decisions.’

‘Excuse me, sir, but Aranda is no longer in charge in Spain. Godoy is the new Secretary of State.’

‘What are you saying? Just a couple of days ago Aranda was appointed...’

‘Aranda replaced the Count of Floridablanca at the beginning of the year. He was only in the position for a few months. Charles IV dismissed him because of his neutrality policy. Godoy is in charge now.’

Sir Arthur had also been appointed head of intelligence just a few months earlier. His appointment had nothing to do with his experience or knowledge but rather the influence of Lord Bristol, a personal friend of William Brookshield, who was Sir Arthur Blum’s cousin. ‘Disgraceful!’ thought Gordon. But a civil servant must hold his tongue.

‘I mean it is not the end we would have wanted to the century,’ Sir Arthur said, changing the subject to disguise his ignorance. ‘The French have lit a flame under all of Europe with their revolution and it seems to have crossed the Atlantic. George Washington is distancing himself from England more and more by the day. We have lost some of the colonies and neither the King nor the Prime Minister are pleased. The Irish problem was all we needed.’

‘We have man of great worth in Ireland,’ Gordon said, trying to tone down his superior’s vision. Or rather his lack of it.

And he was being honest. Robert Stewart, the First Secretary to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, had certainly achieved remarkable success in three years. Every once in a blue moon, someone gets involved in politics who actually knows how to get things done.

‘Yes,’ Sir Arthur nodded. ‘However, French spies keep inciting the populace and poisoning their minds with calls for independence.’

‘We can also count on William Pitt, the best Prime Minister we have had in years. King George used to appoint his ministers without giving thought to their actual worth but William Pitt’s crushing election victory leaves no room for doubt. He is the one in charge.’

‘Quite right,’ Sir Arthur agreed without much enthusiasm. William Pitt was not in the same party.

So that was the general overview over and done with. That habit of meeting three times a week meant they had to keep repeating the same old conversations. They often met in the corridors and spoke about all kinds of matters but Sir Arthur was set in his ways. However,

that day Ferguson had given Gordon a topic for conversation.

‘I have just spoken to Ferguson...’ Gordon began.

‘Ah, how is that young man doing?’ Sir Arthur asked.

‘He is determined and polite,’ Gordon praised him. And no wonder! He was a protégée after all.

‘The problem is our man in Madrid.’

‘Madrid?’

‘Yes, sir. Captain Lear.’

‘Lear?’

‘John Lear, sir. Our number one in Madrid.’

‘A very enterprising young chap. He is Horatio Lear’s son,’ Sir Arthur recalled. As far as he was concerned, anyone with an important father deserved respect. Gordon nodded. ‘What’s the matter with him?’

‘McFar is here. He arrived yesterday.’

‘McFar?’

‘Andrew McFar,’ Gordon reminded him, desperation creeping into his voice. ‘Our number two in Madrid.’

‘Of course! Now I remember,’ Sir Arthur nodded several times but Gordon realised Sir Arthur had not the slightest idea who McFar was. He was not a son of anyone important. ‘What is McFar doing here?’ he asked, feigning surprise.

‘Captain Lear has been killed in a duel by a distant cousin of the Spanish Prime Minister.’ He was quiet for a moment then concluded, ‘It was over a lady.’

‘I told you he was too visible,’ Sir Arthur exclaimed. He no longer remembered having said that Lear was a very enterprising young man and Gordon did not remember him ever having mentioned that warning, but he held his tongue. ‘What was he thinking? Quarrelling with a cousin of Godoy’s?’

‘A distant cousin,’ Gordon corrected him.

Sir Arthur bristled. Gordon’s constant pedantry got on his nerves.

‘A distant cousin then,’ he accepted, shaking his head. ‘That could be a very costly mistake. Our officials must restrict themselves to opening up the enemy’s secrets not women’s legs,’ he said, smiling at his own joke.

‘It wasn’t him. It was McFar.’

‘What?’

‘Ferguson says McFar was the lover but the husband mistook him for the captain. In any case, Godoy found out the truth of it and McFar had to flee for his life.’

‘I knew Lear could not have made a mistake like that,’ said Sir

Arthur, going back on what he had just said.

Gordon did not reply then either. Sir Arthur was quiet for a moment, ruminating. 'Thinking things over?' Gordon asked. His superior was pretending to think but he knew perfectly well there was nothing going on in that head of his. As always, Sir Arthur was waiting for Gordon to speak first. But Gordon had already had enough of getting his fingers burnt pulling other people's chestnuts out of the fire.

'Who do we have left in Madrid?' Sir Arthur finally asked.

'Albert Flint. But he is the embassy's second secretary and is too well known.'

'So now what?'

A question worthy of the sharpest of minds. Just like Ferguson. Now what? Those two would understand one another perfectly!

'It will take time and effort to create a new Captain Lear,'

Gordon said.

'Yet it is so easy to get the ball rolling!' Sir Arthur pontificated. Then inspiration suddenly struck him. 'Harry Berg! He is experienced.'

'He is in Vienna,' Gordon reminded him.

'Yes, but he is our only option.'

Gordon thought it over. He could remind him of Berg's speedy departure from Madrid and that he was no longer under his orders. He could say that Jack Smith would not willingly lose him and spend ages filling in all the details. Or he could bring the matter to a quick close.

'That's impossible, sir,' he said, shaking his head. 'We cannot strip Vienna naked to clothe Madrid, especially since France is on the move. Spain is currently no threat but things could end up very badly between France and Austria. We need eyes in Vienna.'

'There is nothing concrete in Austria yet,' Sir Arthur smiled. The war will be over in a flash.'

When a man is born an idiot, you can give him as important a job as you like yet he will remain an idiot, Gordon thought. The Austrians had not entered France as easily or as quickly as they had promised.

'Mr Smith says that the pot is about to boil,' Gordon replied.

'Now, I won't say Jack Smith's suppositions are groundless, but they are based on rumour, nonetheless. We must think about what to do with Spain.'

'We must think' meant someone had to think. Obviously not Sir Arthur. Perhaps it was time to remind him of Gordon's views about espionage in the modern world. Perhaps not. He had tried to on many occasions and the response had never been positive.

'I will get working on it,' he finally concluded.

‘Keep an eye on Berg. Austria is vital right now,’ Sir Arthur said.

That man was unbelievable. Berg reported to Jack Smith. He was not even aware what position he held. Still, one’s superior must always have the last word, be it repeated, mistaken, copied or stolen.

Step one: McFar. Ferguson’s explanations were not overly explicit and Gordon did not trust him one bit.

McFar turned up right away and Gordon settled into his chair and listened to that tale of lovers, cuckolded husbands and dead spies.

‘I warned him she was a dangerous woman, but...’

‘Who was the lady’s lover: you or him?’ asked Gordon when he heard McFar’s first words.

‘Captain John Lear, in theory.’

Good heavens! Ferguson was incapable of passing on a message properly.

‘What do you mean, in theory? And who is she?’

‘The Baron of Malpica’s wife,’ McFar said. ‘She is a woman of great appetites in every sense,’ he added. Gordon half-closed his eyes and listened carefully. ‘She had Captain Lear wrapped around her little finger but that woman is never satisfied. She says we English are colder, go more slowly and take more time. That is good because then it lasts longer. But she also says we are less intense and she needs more ... energy. Do you see?’ He paused briefly until Gordon nodded and then went on, ‘So she asked the captain to convince me to join them in a threesome.’

Gordon’s eyes opened as wide as a pair of plates.

‘A threesome?!’

‘The three of us all together,’ McFar explained and bit his lip. ‘You know what I mean.’

‘It seems the captain did not find it too hard to convince you. Am I wrong?’

McFar cleared his throat, shook his head slightly and blushed.

‘The baroness enjoyed the game and we did it again but unfortunately her husband found out. There is a saying in Madrid, "*Tanto va el cántaro a la fuente, que al fin se rompe*"’ McFar explained. When he saw Gordon did not understand, he translated it, ‘When the pitcher is taken to the fountain too many times, it eventually breaks.’

‘What is a *cántaro*?’ Gordon asked.

‘It is an earthenware jug that keeps water cool. It is rounded and the water flows through a spout to one side at the top,’ McFar replied.

As Gordon did not quite understand, he drew it in gestures. 'Rounded like this, and the place the water comes out of is a little protuberance shaped like this...' He brought his fingers closer together.

'A bit like a nipple?'

'That's a good example.'

'Rounded... Perhaps like a woman's breast?'

'A woman with a generous figure.'

'I see. It cools water and warms the blood,' Gordon smiled. His seriousness then returned. 'Continue.'

'Then Jose Manuel de Castro, the lady's brother, accused us of having taken advantage of his sister and dishonoured his brother-in-law. He said the baron was an invalid. He walks with a cane... And as he is short of a penny, he demanded fifteen thousand duros to restore his honour. The Captain laughed in his face and said they could go to court if he wished because the lady in question was a whore and all Madrid knew it. So no judge would swallow that story. Voices rose, tempers flared and Don Jose challenged us to a duel. If we refused to pay, first he would take on the captain and then me. As you know, Captain Lear is a great shot with a pistol...' He hesitated for a moment. 'Or was... But, as was his prerogative as the injured party, Don Jose chose the foil. The next day at dawn, he dispatched the captain in a blink of an eye. And as I have no fortune and could not pay fifteen thousand duros I, erm... did not think it would be appropriate to stay in Madrid.'

'Weren't you there when Lear died?'

'The duel took place at dawn and Don Jose Manuel said that one duel a day was enough. He told me to come the following day.'

'And you ran away?'

'Don Jose Manuel is one of Madrid's leading swordsmen,' McFar said in his defence. 'If the captain was not good enough, I doubt I would have fared any better.'

Gordon had heard enough. How could such a meticulously laid plan slide down the drain because of such stupidity? What a bunch of useless fools!

'I want a detailed report on everything that is going on in Madrid. And a list of names of every Englishman you can remember who is still living in Spain. And I said Spain, not just the capital.'

'When would you like it?'

'First thing this afternoon.'

'It is almost lunchtime,' McFar dared say, but Gordon's look said everything.

That afternoon Gordon arrived at his office in a foul mood. He had spent the rest of the morning going through all of his men and could not find anyone available who was up to mustard. The clouds looming over the Continent were a worrying sight and the recent months' losses made the problem that pair of fools had caused more than a little complicated. He did not know where to begin. He was sure if he did not find a solution soon, that useless Sir Arthur would start bellowing at him like a madman.

'Gordon, you have disappointed me,' he would say. 'Perhaps we will need to take a decision,' he would threaten.

McFar's report was on his desk. Gordon rested his spectacles on his nose and started to read.

Blah, blah, blah, blah... excuses. That was all it contained. He picked up the list of Englishmen living in Spain but did not even glance at it. He was tired. He took off his spectacles, set them on the desk and looked out of the window. The afternoon was as grey as the morning had been.

He took McFar's list and opened the small door to the adjoining office. It belonged to Brenton, a scrawny but efficient little man. Gordon had chosen the man himself.

'I want all the information you can find about all the names on this list,' he ordered. 'I want details. Understood?'