

BRING ME HIS DEAD BODY

What was special about 18 October 1818? Well, there are three eighTEENS in that date. And what is special about the number 18? If you add the two figures, one and eight, together that gives nine, and in numerology nine represents the end, the culmination and the conclusion of all things. And, obviously, when one thing ends that means another begins. The date also contains the month of October, which is numerically signified by 10. A one and a zero, which adds up to one. In numerology, one is the start of everything. Three nines, three endings, and a one, a beginning. It would hardly be surprising if something special happened on a such a momentous day. Yet incomprehensible phenomena that people in ancient times attributed to divine intervention often go unnoticed because no-one is paying attention or has the skill, knowledge or power needed to discover them. It is only long after, with historical hindsight, that we notice them and are shocked at what we all see as being a result of luck, coincidence or chance. One of those temporal coincidences was about to happen that very day.

Charles Duvalier, in Paris, knocked on the door of the Duke of Decazes, the French Minister of Police. At the same time, in London, James Barrow was going into the office of Lord Parry, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. The fact that the British secretary of state's desk was further from the door than the French minister's cancelled out the time difference between the two men sitting in two different cities in two different countries. Duvalier and Barrow reached out their hands at the very same moment to hand their respective documents over to their respective superiors and begin their respective sentences in union, saying identical words. The only difference was the language they spoke in.

'We have lost Ali Bey.'

In spite of the distance separating them, both Lord Parry and the Duke of Decazes reacted in exactly the same way: by giving the man on the other side of the desk a look of stupidity.

There the coincidences ended, the die of chance rolled again and everything returned to normal, each man continuing along his own path.

'What do you mean we have lost him?' asked Decazes in Paris.

'We don't know where he is,' Duvalier replied, pointing at the report he had just handed over.

'What a disaster!' the minister exclaimed.

In London, Lord Parry leafed through the report.

'Is this some new trick by that bastard?' he cried.

'I don't know, sir. According to our ambassador in Constantinople we haven't heard anything about his whereabouts for many days,' Barrow pointed at the document, showing him that the information was further down the page. 'It seems a certain Polish Count Rzewuski told the Marquis de Riviere, the French ambassador in Constantinople, that he was with Ali Bey up until a few hours before he died.'

'Is that definite?' Lord Parry asked.

'There is other information to suggest he was en route to India.'

'Which of the two is right?'

'Count Rzewuski apparently provides details. So he could be dead.'

'If he were dead we could congratulate ourselves on finally closing the Badia case. France would have lost their man and we would be catching up to them. We couldn't ask for anything better,' Lord Parry thought aloud.

'If I may say so sir, under the circumstances, even if Badia had died the case wouldn't be closed,' Barrow said, arching his eyebrows and bending his neck. 'According to our ambassador in Constantinople, the French have started spreading a rumour that we were the ones who ...' he added and waited for his superior's reaction.

'We did it?' Lord Parry asked, incredulous.

'Of course we didn't, sir!' Barrow energetically replied. 'The order was that our men were

merely to keep us informed of his movements. No-one was given instructions to kill him. And no-one touched a hair on his head.'

'So ...?'

'Now I know you will tell me we shouldn't worry because even if he is dead no-one can prove anything, but Count Rzewuski, who was there buying horses for William I of Württemberg, has said that Ali Bey insinuated that perfidious Albion might be scheming and ...'

'Who is that dreadful woman?'

'Albion is what the Romans called the south of England although it was the Greeks who first named our land so,' Barrow explained. Lord Parry nodded and he went on. 'The fact is that count would have...'

'Would have, could have ... don't you think it's all a bit too circumstantial?' Lord Parry cut him off.

'Yes but Lady Stanhope thinks so too.'

'Lady Stanhope?'

'Lady Lucy Hester Stanhope, a niece of William Pitt, the former prime minister.' Barrow kept quiet to see if Lord Parry would find his bearings or whether he should explain further.

'Oh, right!' the secretary of state exclaimed with an amused smile. 'Loony Lucy! Who could forget a woman capable of turning up in the Lebanon, taking over a town, dressing like a man, recruiting her own personal guard and putting the willies up the Ottoman authorities?' The smile was suddenly wiped off his face. He had just realised what that could mean. Lady Lucy could become a real headache if the French believed her. She was English and related to the Pitts. It would be like having a snake in your own home. He was briefly silent. There was something he did not quite understand. What was her connection with Ali Bey?

'Regnault, the French consul in Tripoli, arranged for them to meet. Ali Bey was interested in meeting the woman as she is something of a legend in those parts. In fact, everyone treats her like a queen and her word is law in a small inaccessible region around Yunin, a fortress town. Regnault made the arrangements and the lady agreed to meet him but they were unable to in the end. The caravan was leaving and Ali Bey couldn't miss it,' Barrow quickly explained.

'So what has she got to do with all this?'

'They say she has some wraps of roasted rhubarb that may be poisonous. She received them from Ali Bey himself together with a letter in which he aired his suspicions regarding certain British agents and asked her to send them to Paris if anything happened to him.'

'Why would Ali Bey send them to her? And who was he afraid of?'

'That is the mystery.'

'Barrow, we have a problem,' Lord Parry nodded several times. 'We must get hold of those wraps and analyse them. I don't trust the French. They are capable of all kinds of shenanigans and I don't want any interference. We have been getting on well with France for a while now and it certainly wouldn't be good if we were responsible for a return to conflict. Is that clear?'

'Yes, sir,' Barrow nodded. 'What if we find something untoward when we analyse them?'

'We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. My main concern right now is to make sure the French don't get ahead of us again.'

'Very good, sir,' Barrow nodded and left the office.

It was quite the hot potato. He would send a letter to the commercial attaché at the embassy in Damascus. That would be the quickest way. Voigt could travel to Yunin from Damascus, speak to Lady Stanhope and convince her to hand over the wraps.

A similar conversation was going on in Paris at the very same time.

'Do we know exactly what has happened?' Decazes asked.

'The message from our ambassador is rather vague,' Duvalier replied, pointing at the document. There is a Polish count who says Ali Bey has died of poisoning.'

'By whose hand?' Decazes exclaimed.

'There are contradictory accounts. On the one hand, we can't be sure whether he is dead or alive because no-one has confirmed the Pole's tale. But on the other hand, if he is dead, we don't know who did it because everyone says something different.'

'Oh really?'

'Count Rzewuski says that when the Moroccans who were following Ali Bey saw he had died, they leapt upon him and tore everything from him screaming, "Damned Christian!" Which makes one think it might have been the Moroccans. He was kicked out of Morocco years ago and they might have recognised him. They also say that when they were going to bury him in Transjordan and washed the body according to Muslim rites they found a cross hanging from a necklace. The caravan leader was perplexed. Someone cried, "Damned Christian!" but the caravan leader ripped off the cross, said that Christian or Muslim he deserved a decent burial, and ordered them to bury him as a Muslim. After the ceremony they went on their way and forgot about the incident. However, when they got where they were going, and in spite of the fact that the caravan leader had a legal duty to report the death, no-one did so there is no record of it anywhere,' Duvalier explained. 'Count Rzewuski has also insinuated that it might have been the Pasha of Damascus or a mullah and that the English might have ordered it. He is even talking about perfidious Albion.'

'Perfidious Albion ... A rather elegant and subtle way of saying what he wants to say without pointing the finger at anyone in particular. We must find out what has happened,' Decazes exclaimed, looking Duvalier straight in the eye. 'I want to be absolutely certain, if the mission continues, that England has swallowed our story and we have managed to throw them off the scent. And the only way to do that is to find out where Ali Bey is. If he is dead, I want to see his body or belongings. But I want tangible proof. Understand?'

'Yes, sir,' Duvalier nodded and left.

He had his work cut out. First he had to write a stream of letters: to Constantinople, Aleppo, Tripoli, Damascus, Jerusalem ... Someone would have heard something.

Meanwhile, Decazes thought it over carefully. He had not been expecting that. Richelieu would hit the roof.

'I said it was dangerous to trust that man!' he would scream like a madman.

If that was as far as it went, that would be fine, but if heads started to roll ... look out!

Be that as it may, the problem was that Ali Bey had disappeared and they had to find him. Dead or alive!