

Enigma

In the early days of his malaise, no one suspecting anything, there had been words which simply went missing. Blanks would appear, to be filled in the vocabulary of familiars by “the thingy”, “whatsisname” and so forth, like a first pass through a crossword. Times for amusement and hilarity, the occasional surreal substitution of an inappropriate word by a mischievous relative.

And then Mr. Parkinson was mentioned frequently. He never met Mr. Parkinson, but Mr Parkinson, it seemed, had come to stay.

The frustration of not having his hand do what he wanted it to do; his legs marching to a different drum and going their own way, his mouth failing to hear the message from the brain, when the time came to chew or swallow. As if his own head sometimes acted as the German High Command, issuing instructions which no one should intercept. “We are not at war!” he kept shouting, but it seemed to make not a blind bit of difference. “Lay down your arms!” But his appeals only seemed to make matters worse, for his wife would shout back at him angrily, and push him firmly back into his seat when he stood up to protest. Strange - his body should obey her commands, not his.

He spoke frequently of his pain and anger to her, to his children. Children? - not the right word, anyhow. Not any more - they were far beyond being the children he had hoped to arm with wisdom and worldly knowledge, small ones to entertain and protect. Not since many years, all taller than him now, all with lives of their own, from which he was largely excluded. But they came to visit, they listened to him, they took him the short walks around the block which his legs sometimes managed of their own accord, father, son, grandson, the three ages of Man creeping along the pavements. Sometimes, it seemed, the words he spoke got through. Sometimes, Enigma would be switched on - he could hear it whirring, the cunning rhythm of internal wheels, their cogs interlocking, taking the simplest of words and spinning it in an instant into a cipher; and those about him had not acquired the art and science of finding the patterns which led to decipherment. He could hear them, sometimes, questioning, looking at each other in despair, patting his hand, as if he were an old befuddled fool, with no intelligence, no brain.

His brain was fine. It had always been fine. He had applied it in his life to the very best of his abilities, and the best of his abilities could be good indeed. He had studied many languages. He had rubbed shoulders with all manner of brilliant men. In his younger days, he had got drunk with Norman McCaig. Slightly later, he had for a year taught English at a school in Potsdam; every day, as he walked to work, he would be passed by a man heading for the university on a bicycle. One day, a pupil proudly pointed out that the man pedalling by, at slightly less than the speed of light, was none other than Albert Einstein. “A little maddened, the Herr Professor?” suggested his pupil, making full use of the English idiom which he thought to have acquired.

Now, there were moments of true bewilderment, both for himself and for his eavesdroppers. One evening, he lost his glasses. He had fumbled around the table which was at his right hand, upon which lay his newspaper, his juice and his pen. The newspaper had been carefully folded open at the page with the cryptic crossword, which, in some distant time gone by, he had been able to complete in an hour, maybe two; and the pen seemed to have two blunt ends, and no point to write

with, no matter how often he turned it round and round - a matter he complained of frequently to his wife, to her great and incomprehensible annoyance. And the juice now came in a luke-warm carton with a straw - a far cry from the tumbler of whisky and its tinkling lump of ice with which he had sometimes entertained himself of an evening. His glasses, however, had gone astray. He did not know that they were perched upon his nose, as they had been every day for the past sixty years. Having knocked the juice over the carpet, he found his wife demanding to know, in no uncertain terms, what the devil he was looking for. "My glasses, my dear, just my glasses," was what his brain said. But even his own ears heard the words which came out of the mouth: "The dancing-girls, my dear, nothing but the dancing-girls!"

This was no laughing matter; his wife was deeply offended. Not for nothing had she, after their third child was accidentally conceived some forty years ago, sewn up the fly of his pyjama-bottoms, to prevent any further mishap. Occasionally since then, but only occasionally ... no, he should not remember that. "Dancing-girls?" she shouted, turning up the volume on the television, and facing him in a rage. "What dancing-girls? Whatever do you mean by that?" Her face was red, but cold with fury. "How can you treat me this way?"

"My glasses, is what I meant to say," said his brain. "I've mislaid them, that's all..."

Again, the Enigma machine clicked and purred.

"The lovely dancing-girls, where have they gone? They were here a minute ago - I want them back!"

After a pause for glowering, his wife burst into tears, stormed out of the room. In a few moments, above the cacophony of the television, he could hear her on the telephone, complaining bitterly to someone. He wanted to stand up, go to her, tap her on the shoulder - a hug would be too forward - and explain that his mouth no longer worked. But his muscles, lying in wait for some distant transmissions of their own, refused to recognise his existence. And the remote-control was nowhere in sight.

Some time later, it may have been that same evening, or it might have been a fortnight or a month that had gone by, he awoke from a doze and found his younger son crouched in front of him. He tried to smile, and he hoped it worked. "Hello, son," he said.

"Hello, dad," said his son. The boffins seemed to be at their posts once more. Words were getting through. "How're you feeling?"

He decided to put a brave face on it, and sent out a message that he wasn't at all bad - bit sore from sitting all day long. He held out a shaking hand for his son to hold on to.

"That's good," said his son. There was a long pause: neither of them had been adept at making small-talk. His son mentioned the weather, which had been wet and stormy, it seemed. Work, busy, grandchildren, doing well. Another pause for several minutes. "You know that Robert Maxwell - publishing man?" asked his son, all of a sudden: "He died yesterday, you know."

"No, I didn't know," he replied, as quick as a flash. "But he was a nasty piece of work. Drove him from Düsseldorf to Berlin once, had to interpret for him."

His son was startled, wary: "Did you really? When was that, then?"

So, the messages were still getting through, it seemed. Enigma was engaged, but the boffins were listening. No uncrackable ciphers, despite the military nature of the secrets being passed. With an unusual crystal clarity of sight, scent and sound, he remembered that two-day drive across the devastated German Plain with Maxwell:

one of the most unpleasant men he had had to deal with in that distant timeless summer of 1945.

But the act of deciphering was rarely as efficient as on the day after Maxwell's death. The codes were purposely changed each morning to ensure that communications remained secure. Indeed, after that visit from his son, the codes seemed to have been switched to a completely new pattern, one which defied the theories of the boffins. At the end of November, he had been transported by a mechanical conveyance with a long name, driven by men of Hungarian tongue, to an antiquated place of death. On that very night, he feared the Coming of Oblivion and Her Several Angels, and cried aloud the secrets of his life, his lost loves, his nightmares. And for three memorable days thereafter, he spoke Romanian to the doctors and nurses.

It was fortunate indeed that one of the cleaners in the hospital was a Romanian refugee, else there would have been medical consternation and a conspiracy of consultants. But it turned out that the nursing-staff need not have bothered paying the cleaner overtime for his language skills, since the matter and purpose of the three days of words was a description of the patient's holiday in the Danube Delta, a place which Mr. Tufescu had never seen, except on faded travel posters in the smoky buses of his home-town of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej. Nonetheless, there was ample opportunity for the cleaner to relax, sip sweet tea, and discuss, in the language of his homeland, the pleasures of soft bosoms, cold beer, and oil-refineries, while, all the time, his wage-packet expanded. His pleasure came to an abrupt end on the morning of the fourth day, when the outpouring of Basic - or O-Level - Romanian switched in mid-sentence to Norwegian. Mr. Tufescu was no master of the art of dissimulation, and yielded his comfortable chair after an hour, to return to his broom-cupboard and reflect on the mysterious ways of capitalists.

Thereafter, it seemed a perverse retaliation by the world in general to issue its instructions in a manner calculated to offend. Was he a child, that they spoke to him in baby-talk, urged him to place one foot before the other, advised him not to droop his head, scolded him for dribbling his food? He was a grown man, after all: He had, in one horrible week of his life, been the official interpreter for Field-Marshal Goering. One week, at the Nuremberg Trials in the closing months of 1945, in that bright-lit courtroom where the bogeymen and Antichrists of his recent past were gathered in a pen, looking like shifty gangsters. One week, punctuated by sleepless nights and excessive numbers of American cigarettes, until he had asked to be relieved of his responsibilities, and had returned to other, less apocalyptic, duties. Since then, he had kept this one week a secret. But, was he, Official Interpreter for Hermann Goering, to be treated as an irrational child, a helpless fool, by people who could barely speak the languages?

And, of course, when he tried to salvage some shred of dignity, with a "do you know who I am?" speech, which would restore his dignity amongst his captives - the words were destroyed by interfering radio-waves, and it sounded, to his own ears as to those of his attendants, like the incoherent babbling of a speechless infant or dotard. It sometimes happened - magnetic disturbances in the upper atmosphere, thunderstorms over Hanover, whatever.

And then silence set in, for a period of two weeks. No transmissions got out, no messages came in. There was nothing to be heard but a steady background hum in the air. Mouths moved, but no sounds were to be heard from either side of the

enemy lines. Ever in life a quiet, unassuming man, he now found himself quietened, and presumed a poor idiot. The nurses persisted in dealing with him as if he were deaf, dumb, dull and daft. He could only hit out feebly, with fists and feet, since words had no meaning. He, whose greatest aptitude had been to teach language, resorted to the most basic forms of communication - howling and touching; or otherwise none at all.

He had spent the better part of 1941 at Bletchley Park. He remembered the endless hours spent poring over the deciphered orders of the German High Command; discovering what the enemy had intended to do, two days or a week previously, and knowing that it was too late to prevent the deaths and destruction which were planned for both sides and anyone caught in between; or finishing the translation from German in precipitate haste, and passing the information thus unlocked to his superior officer, in the hope that someone might act upon it, and counter the German attack when it came. In all of that time, he knew nothing of the Enigma machines, the Ultra machines, the secret acts of war, logic and heroism which kept the communications of war from being a deadly secret. Knowing nothing, he was nevertheless not permitted, by order of His Majesty's Government, to make too many revelations. True, he had been released from the Official Secrets Act in 1975, and, reading in the newspapers one Sunday morning, had learned more of his contribution to the war-effort than he had ever known. But old habits die hard, and he did not seek an opportunity to tell anyone. And now that he wished to talk, the daily keys for Enigma had been set after a pattern which defied the boffins, and all deciphering failed, night after night, day after day.

After two weeks of radio-silence came death, the Great Enigma.