## Gustav

W. Somerset Maugham

When Ashenden, given charge of a number of spies working from Switzerland, was first sent there, R., wishing him to see the sort of reports that he would be required to obtain, handed him the communications, a sheaf of typewritten documents, of a man known in the secret service as Gustav.

‘He’s the best fellow we’ve got,’ said R. ‘His information is always very full and circumstantial. I want you to give his reports your very best attention. Of course Gustav is a clever little chap, but there’s no reason why we shouldn’t get just as good reports from the other agents. It’s merely a question of explaining exactly what we want.’

Gustav, who lived at Basle, represented a Swiss firm with branches at Frankfurt, Mannheim and Cologne, and by virtue of his business was able to go in and out of Germany without risk. He travelled up and down the Rhine, and gathered material about the movement of troops, the manufacture of munitions, the state of mind of the country (a point on which R. laid stress) and other matters upon which the Allies desired information. His frequent letters to his wife hid an ingenious code and the moment she received them in Basle she sent them to Ashenden in Geneva, who extracted from them the important facts and communicated these in the proper quarter. Every two months Gustav came home and prepared one of the reports that served as models to the other spies in this particular section of the secret service.

His employers were pleased with Gustav and Gustav had reason to be pleased with his employers. His services were so useful that he was not only paid more highly than the others, but for particular scoops had received from time to time a handsome bonus.

This went on for more than a year. Then something aroused R.’s quick suspicions; he was a man of an amazing alertness, not so much of mind, as of instinct, and he had suddenly a feeling that some hanky-panky was going on. He said nothing definite to Ashenden (whatever R. surmised he was disposed to keep to himself), but told him to go to Basle, Gustav being then in Germany, and have a talk with Gustav’s wife. He left it to Ashenden to decide the tenor of the conversation.

Having arrived at Basle, and leaving his bag at the station, for he did not yet know whether he would have to stay or not, he took a tram to the corner of the street in which Gustav lived and, with a quick look to see that he was not followed, walked along to the house he sought. It was a block of flats that gave you the impression of decent poverty and Ashenden conjectured that they were inhabited by clerks and small tradespeople. Just inside the door was a cobbler’s shop and Ashenden stopped.

‘Does Herr Grabow live here?’ he asked in his none too fluent German.

‘Yes, I saw him go up a few minutes ago. You’ll find him in.’

Ashenden was startled, for he had but the day before received through Gustav’s wife a letter addressed from Mannheim in which Gustav by means of his code gave the numbers of certain regiments that had just crossed the Rhine. Ashenden thought it unwise to ask the cobbler the question that rose to his lips, so thanked him and went up to the third floor on which he knew already that Gustav lived. He rang the bell and heard it tinkle within. In a moment the door was opened by a dapper little man with a close-shaven round head and spectacles. He wore carpet slippers.

‘Herr Grabow?’ asked Ashenden.

‘At your service,’ said Gustav.

‘May I come in?’

Gustav was standing with his back to the light and Ashenden could not see the look on his face. He felt a momentary hesitation and gave the name under which he received Gustav’s letters from Germany.

‘Come in, come in. I am very glad to see you.’

Gustav led the way into a stuffy little room, heavy with carved oak furniture, and on the large table covered with a table-cloth of green velveteen was a typewriter. Gustav was apparently engaged in composing one of his invaluable reports. A woman was sitting at the open window darning socks, but at a word from Gustav rose, gathered up her things and left. Ashenden had disturbed a pretty picture of connubial bliss.

‘Sit down, please. How very fortunate that I was in Basle! I have long wanted to make your acquaintance. I have only just this minute returned from Germany.’ He pointed to the sheets of paper by the typewriter. ‘I think you will be pleased with the news I bring. I have some very valuable information.’ He chuckled. ‘One is never sorry to earn a bonus.’

He was very cordial, but to Ashenden his cordiality rang false. Gustav kept his eyes, smiling behind the glasses, fixed watchfully on Ashenden, and it was possible that they held a trace of nervousness.

‘You must have travelled quickly to get here only a few hours after your letter, sent here and then sent on by your wife, reached me in Geneva.’

‘That is very probable. One of the things I had to tell you is that the Germans suspect that information is getting through by means of commercial letters and so they have decided to hold up all mail at the frontier for eight-and-forty hours.’

‘I see,’ said Ashenden amiably. ‘And was it on that account that you took the precaution of dating your letter forty-eight hours after you sent it?’

‘Did I do that? That was very stupid of me. I must have mistaken the day of the month.’

Ashenden looked at Gustav with a smile. That was very thin; Gustav, a business man, knew too well how important in his particular job was the exactness of a date. The circuitous routes by which it was necessary to get information from Germany made it difficult to transmit news quickly and it was essential to know precisely on what days certain events had taken place.

‘Let me look at your passport a minute,’ said Ashenden.

‘What do you want with my passport?’

‘I want to see when you went into Germany and when you came out.’

‘But you do not imagine that my comings and goings are marked on my passport? I have methods of crossing the frontier.’

Ashenden knew a good deal of this matter. He knew that both the Germans and the Swiss guarded the frontier with severity.

‘Oh? Why should you not cross in the ordinary way? You were engaged because your connection with a Swiss firm supplying necessary goods to Germany made it easy for you to travel backwards and forwards without suspicion. I can understand that you might get past the German sentries with the connivance of the Germans, but what about the Swiss?’

Gustav assumed a look of indignation.

‘I do not understand you. Do you mean to suggest that I am in the service of the Germans? I give you my word of honour . . . I will not allow my straightforwardness to be impugned.’

‘You would not be the only one to take money from both sides and provide information of value to neither.’

‘Do you pretend that my information is of no value? Why then have you given me more bonuses than any other agent has received? The Colonel has repeatedly expressed the highest satisfaction with my services.’

It was Ashenden’s turn now to be cordial.

‘Come, come, my dear fellow, do not try to ride the high horse. You do not wish to show me your passport and I will not insist. You are not under the impression that we leave the statements of our agents without corroboration or that we are so foolish as not to keep track of their movements? Even the best of jokes cannot bear an indefinite repetition. I am in peace-time a humorist by profession and I tell you that from bitter experience.’ Now Ashenden thought the moment had arrived to attempt his bluff; he knew something of the excellent but difficult game of poker. ‘We have information that you have not been to Germany now, nor since you were engaged by us, but have sat here quietly in Basle, and all your reports are merely due to your fertile imagination.’

Gustav looked at Ashenden and saw a face expressive of nothing but tolerance and good humour. A smile slowly broke on his lips and he gave his shoulders a little shrug.

‘Did you think I was such a fool as to risk my life for fifty pounds a month? I love my wife.’

Ashenden laughed outright.

‘I congratulate you. It is not everyone who can flatter himself that he has made a fool of our secret service for a year.’

‘I had the chance of earning money without any difficulty. My firm stopped sending me into Germany at the beginning of the war, but I learned what I could from the other travellers. I kept my ears open in restaurants and beer-cellars, and I read the German papers. I got a lot of amusement out of sending you reports and letters.’

‘I don’t wonder,’ said Ashenden.

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Nothing. What can we do? You are not under the impression that we shall continue to pay you a salary?’

‘No, I cannot expect that.’

‘By the way, if it is not indiscreet, may I ask if you have been playing the same game with the Germans?’

‘Oh, no,’ Gustav cried vehemently. ‘How can you think it? My sympathies are absolutely pro-ally. My heart is entirely with you.’

‘Well, why not?’ asked Ashenden. ‘The Germans have all the money in the world and there is no reason why you should not get some of it. We could give you information from time to time that the Germans would be prepared to pay for.’

Gustav drummed his fingers on the table. He took up a sheet of the now useless report.

‘The Germans are dangerous people to meddle with.’

‘You are a very intelligent man. And after all, even if your salary is stopped, you can always earn a bonus by bringing us news that can be useful to us. But it will have to be substantiated; in future we pay only by results.’

‘I will think of it.’

For a moment or two Ashenden left Gustav to his reflections. He lit a cigarette and watched the smoke he had inhaled fade into the air. He thought too.

‘Is there anything particular you want to know?’ asked Gustav suddenly.

Ashenden smiled.

‘It would be worth a couple of thousand Swiss francs to you if you could tell me what the Germans are doing with a spy of theirs in Lucerne. He is an Englishman and his name is Grantley Caypor.’

‘I have heard the name,’ said Gustav. He paused a moment. ‘How long are you staying here?’

‘As long as necessary. I will take a room at the hotel and let you know the number. If you have anything to say to me you can be sure of finding me in my room at nine every morning and at seven every night.’

‘I should not risk coming to the hotel. But I can write.’

‘Very well.’

Ashenden rose to go and Gustav accompanied him to the door.

‘We part without ill-feeling then?’ he asked.

‘Of course. Your reports will remain in our archives as models of what a report should be.’

Ashenden spent two or three days visiting Basle. It did not much amuse him. He passed a good deal of time in the book-shops turning over the pages of books that would have been worth reading if life were a thousand years long. Once he saw Gustav in the street. On the fourth morning a letter was brought up with his coffee. The envelope was that of a commercial firm unknown to him and inside it was a typewritten sheet. There was no address and no signature. Ashenden wondered if Gustav was aware that a typewriter could betray its owner as certainly as a handwriting. Having twice carefully read the letter, he held the paper up to the light to see the watermark (he had no reason for doing this except that the sleuths of detective novels always did it), then struck a match and watched it bum. He scrunched up the charred fragments in his hand.

He got up, for he had taken advantage of his situation to breakfast in bed, packed his bag and took the next train to Berne. From there he was able to send a code telegram to R. His instructions were given to him verbally two days later, in the bedroom of his hotel at an hour when no one was likely to be seen walking along a corridor, and within twenty-four hours, though by a circuitous route, he arrived at Lucerne.