## The Flip of a Coin

W. Somerset Maugham

It was high time. Snow had fallen in the morning, but now the sky was clear and Ashenden, with a glance at the frosty stars, stepped out quickly. He feared that Herbartus, tired of waiting for him, might have gone home. He had at this interview to make a certain decision and the hesitation he felt about it had lurked throughout the evening at the back of his mind like a malaise that had only to become a little more definite to be felt as pain. For Herbartus, indefatigable and determined, had been engaged in the arrangement of a scheme to blow up certain munition factories in Austria. It is not necessary to give here the details of his plan, but it was ingenious and effective; its drawback was that it entailed the death and mutilation of a good many Galician Poles, his fellow countrymen, who were working in the factories in question. He had told Ashenden earlier in the day that everything was ready and he had only to give the word.

‘But please do not give it unless it is essential,’ he said in his precise, somewhat throaty English. ‘Of course will not hesitate if it is necessary, but we do not want to sacrifice our own people for nothing.’

‘When do you want an answer?’

‘To-night. We have got someone who is starting for Prague to-morrow morning.’

It was then that Ashenden had made the appointment that he was now hurrying to keep.

‘You will not be late, will you?’ Herbartus had said. ‘I shall not be able to catch the messenger after midnight.’

Ashenden had qualms and he was conscious that it would be a relief if on reaching the hotel he found that Herbartus had left. That would give him a respite. The Germans had blown up factories in the Allied countries and there was no reason why they should not be served in the same manner. It was a legitimate act of war. It not only hindered the manufacture of arms and munitions, but also shook the morale of the non-combatants. It was not of course a thing that the big-wigs cared to have anything to do with. Though ready enough to profit by the activities of obscure agents of whom they had never heard, they shut their eyes to dirty work so that they could put their clean hands on their hearts and congratulate themselves that they had never done anything that was unbecoming to men of honour. Ashenden thought with cynical humour of an incident in his relations with R. He had been approached with an offer that he thought it his duty to put before his chief.

‘By the way,’ he said to him as casually as possible, ‘I’ve got a sportsman who’s willing to assassinate King B. for five thousand pounds.’

King B. was the ruler of a Balkan state which was on the verge through his influence of declaring war against the Allies, and it was evident that his disappearance from the scene would be extremely useful. His successor’s sympathies were indefinite and it might be possible to persuade him to keep his country neutral. Ashenden saw from R.’s quick, intent look that he was perfectly aware of the situation. But he frowned sulkily.

‘Well, what of it?’

‘I told him I’d transmit his offer. I believe he’s perfectly genuine. He’s pro-Ally and he thinks it would about bust his country if it went in on the side of the Germans.’

‘What’s he want five thousand pounds for, then?’

‘It’s a risk and if he does the Allies a good turn he doesn’t see why he shouldn’t get something out of it.’

R. shook his head energetically.

‘It’s not the kind of thing we can have anything to do with. We don’t wage war by those methods. We leave them to the Germans. Damn it all, we are gentlemen.’

Ashenden did not reply, but watched R. with attention. There was in his eyes the curious reddish light that they sometimes had and that gave them so sinister an expression. He had always a slight tendency to squint and now he was quite definitely cross-eyed.

‘You ought to know better than to put up a proposition like that to me. Why didn’t you knock the man down when he made it?’

‘I didn’t think I could,’ said Ashenden. ‘He was bigger than I. Besides, it never occurred to me. He was very civil and obliging.’

‘Of course it would be a damned good thing for the Allies if King B. were out of the way. I admit that. But between that and countenancing his assassination there’s all the difference between black and white. If the man were a patriot I should have thought he’d have gone straight ahead and done what he thought right regardless.’

‘He may be thinking of his widow,’ said Ashenden.

‘Anyhow, it’s not a matter I’m prepared to discuss. Different people look at things in different ways and if anyone thought he was helping the Allies by taking on his shoulders a heavy responsibility that’s of course entirely his look-out.’

It took Ashenden a moment to see what his chief meant. Then he smiled thinly.

‘Don’t think I’m going to pay the fellow five thousand pounds out of my own pocket. Not a chance.’

‘I don’t think anything of the kind and you know I don’t, and I shall be obliged if you won’t exercise your very deficient sense of humour on me.’

Ashenden shrugged his shoulders; and now, recalling the conversation, he shrugged them again. They were all like that. They desired the end, but hesitated at the means. They were willing to take advantage of an accomplished fact, but wanted to shift on to someone else the responsibility of bringing it about.

Ashenden entered the café of the Hotel de Paris and saw Herbartus seated at a table facing the door. He gave the little gasp that is forced from you when you dive into water that is colder than you expected. There was no escape. He must make the decision. Herbartus was drinking a glass of tea. His heavy, clean-shaven face lit up when he saw Ashenden and he stretched out a large, hairy hand. He was a big, dark fellow, of a powerful build, with fierce black eyes. Everything about him suggested a massive strength. He was hampered by no scruples, and since he was disinterested he was ruthless.

‘Well, how did your dinner go off?’ he asked as Ashenden sat down. ‘Did you say anything to the ambassador about our project?’

‘No.’

‘I think you were wise. It is best to leave those sort of people out of serious matters.’

Ashenden looked at Herbartus for a minute reflectively. His face bore a singular expression and he sat warily like a tiger about to spring.

‘Have you ever read Balzac’s Père Goriot?’ asked Ashenden suddenly.

‘Twenty years ago, when I was a student.’

‘Do you remember that conversation between Rastignac and Vautrin where they discuss the question whether, were you able by a nod to effect the death of a mandarin in China and so bring yourself a collossal fortune, you would give the nod? It was a notion of Rousseau’s.’

Herbartus’s large face coiled itself into a slow, large smile.

‘It has nothing to do with the case. You are uneasy at giving an order that will cause the death of a considerable number of people. Is it for your own profit? When a general orders an advance he knows that so and so many men will be killed. It is war.’

‘What a stupid war!’

‘It will give my country freedom.’

‘What will your country do with it when it gets it?’

Herbartus did not answer. He shrugged his shoulders.

‘I warn you that if you do not take this opportunity it may not recur very soon. We cannot send a messenger over the frontier every day of the week.’

‘Doesn’t it make you a little uncomfortable to think of all those men being suddenly blown to smithereens by an explosion? And then it’s not only the dead, it’s the maimed.’

‘I don’t like it. I said to you that on account of my fellow countrymen who will be sacrificed we should do nothing unless it was worth while. I do not want those poor fellows to be killed, but if they are I shall not sleep less soundly nor eat my dinner with less appetite. Will you?’

‘I suppose not.’

‘Well, then?’

Ashenden thought on a sudden of those sharp-pointed stars on which for a moment his eyes had rested as he walked through the frosty night. It seemed an age since he had sat in the spacious dining-room at the embassy and listened to Sir Herbert Witherspoon’s story of his successful, wasted life. Mr. Schafer’s susceptibilities and his own small intrigues, the love of Byring and Rose Auburn: how unimportant; Man, with so short a time between the cradle and the grave, spent his life in foolishness. A trivial creature! The bright stars shone in the cloudless sky.

‘I’m tired, I can’t think with any clearness.’

‘I must go in a minute.’

‘Then let’s toss for it, shall we?’

‘Toss?’

‘Yes,’ said Ashenden, taking a coin out of his pocket. ‘If it comes down heads tell your man to go ahead and if it comes down tails tell him to do nothing.’

‘Very well.’

Ashenden balanced the coin on his thumb-nail and flicked it neatly into the air. They watched it spin and when it fell back on the table Ashenden put his hand over it. They both leaned forward to look as Ashenden very slowly withdrew his hand. Herbartus drew a deep breath.

‘Well, that’s that,’ said Ashenden.