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Can I Help You?

The Secret Service holds much that is kept secret even from very senior officers in the organisation. Only M and his Chief of Staff know absolutely everything there is to know. The latter is responsible for keeping the Top Secret record known as ‘The War Book’ so that, in the event of the death of both of them, the whole story, apart from what is available to individual Sections and Stations, would be available to their successors.

One thing that James Bond, for instance, didn’t know was the machinery at Headquarters for dealing with the public, whether friendly or otherwise – drunks, lunatics, bona fide applications to join the Service and enemy agents with plans for penetration or even assassination.

On that cold, clear morning in November he was to see the careful cogwheels in motion.

The girl at the switchboard at the Ministry of Defence flicked the switch to ‘Hold’ and said to her neighbour, ‘It’s another nut who says he’s James Bond. Even knows his code number. Says he wants to speak to M personally.’

The senior girl shrugged. The switchboard had had

quite a few such calls since, a year before, James Bond's death on a mission to Japan had been announced in the press. There had even been one pestiferous woman who, at every full moon, passed on messages from Bond from Uranus where it seemed he had got stuck while awaiting entry into heaven. She said, 'Put him through to Liaison, Pat.'

The Liaison Section was the first cog in the machine, the first sieve. The operator got back on the line: 'Just a moment, sir. I'll put you on to an officer who may be able to help you.'

James Bond, sitting on the edge of his bed, said, 'Thank you.'

He had expected some delay before he could establish his identity. He had been warned to expect it by the charming 'Colonel Boris' who had been in charge of him for the past few months after he had finished his treatment in the luxurious Institute on the Nevsky Prospekt in Leningrad. A man's voice came on the line. 'Captain Walker speaking. Can I help you?'

James Bond spoke slowly and clearly. 'This is Commander James Bond speaking. Number 007. Would you put me through to M, or his secretary, Miss Money Penny. I want to make an appointment.'

Captain Walker pressed two buttons on the side of his telephone. One of them switched on a tape-recorder for the use of his department, the other alerted one of the duty officers in the Action Room of the Special Branch at Scotland Yard that he should listen to the conversation, trace the call and at once put a tail on the

caller. It was now up to Captain Walker, who was in fact an extremely bright ex-prisoner-of-war interrogator from Military Intelligence, to keep the subject talking for as near five minutes as possible. He said, 'I'm afraid I don't know either of these two people. Are you sure you've got the right number?'

James Bond patiently repeated the Regent number which was the main outside line for the Secret Service. Together with so much else, he had forgotten it, but Colonel Boris had known it and had made him write it down among the small print on the front page of his forged British passport that said his name was Frank Westmacott, company director.

'Yes,' said Captain Walker sympathetically. 'We seem to have got that part of it right. But I'm afraid I can't place these people you want to talk to. Who exactly are they? This Mr Em, for instance. I don't think we've got anyone of that name at the Ministry.'

'Do you want me to spell it out? You realise this is an open line?'

Captain Walker was rather impressed by the confidence in the speaker's voice. He pressed another button and, so that Bond would hear it, a telephone bell rang. He said, 'Hang on a moment, would you? There's someone on my other line.' Captain Walker got on to the head of his Section. 'Sorry, sir. I've got a chap on who says he's James Bond and wants to talk to M. I know it sounds crazy and I've gone through the usual motions with the Special Branch and so on, but would you mind listening for a minute? Thank you, sir.'

Two rooms away a harassed man, who was the Chief Security Officer for the Secret Service, said ‘Blast!’ and pressed a switch. A microphone on his desk came to life. The Chief Security Officer sat very still. He badly needed a cigarette, but his room was now ‘live’ to Captain Walker and to the lunatic who called himself ‘James Bond’. Captain Walker’s voice came over at full strength. ‘I’m so sorry. Now then. This man Mr Em you want to talk to. I’m sure we needn’t worry about security. Could you be more specific?’

James Bond frowned. He didn’t know that he had frowned and he wouldn’t have been able to explain why he had done so. He said, and lowered his voice, again inexplicably, ‘Admiral Sir Miles Messervy. He is head of a department in your Ministry. The number of his room used to be “12” on the eighth floor. He used to have a secretary called Miss Money Penny. Good-looking girl. Brunette. Shall I give you the Chief of Staff’s name? No? Well let’s see, it’s Wednesday. Shall I tell you what’ll be the main dish on the menu in the canteen? It should be steak-and-kidney pudding.’

The Chief Security Officer picked up the direct telephone to Captain Walker. Captain Walker said to James Bond, ‘Damn! There’s the other telephone again. Shan’t be a minute.’ He picked up the green telephone. ‘Yes, sir?’

‘I don’t like that bit about the steak-and-kidney pudding. Pass him on to the Hard Man. No. Cancel that. Make it the Soft. There was always something odd about 007’s death. No body. No solid evidence. And the

people on that Japanese island always seemed to me to be playing it pretty close to the chest. The Stone Face act. It's just possible. Keep me informed, would you?'

Captain Walker got back to James Bond. 'Sorry about that. It's being a busy day. Now then, this inquiry of yours. Afraid I can't help you myself. Not my part of the Ministry. The man you want is Major Townsend. He should be able to locate this man you want to see. Got a pencil? It's No. 44 Kensington Cloisters. Got that? Kensington double five double five. Give me ten minutes and I'll have a word with him and see if he can help. All right?'

James Bond said dully, 'That's very kind of you.' He put down the telephone. He waited exactly ten minutes and picked up the receiver and asked for the number.

James Bond was staying at the Ritz Hotel. Colonel Boris had told him to do so. Bond's file in the KGB Archive described him as a high-liver, so, on arrival in London, he must stick to the KGB image of the high life. Bond went down in the lift to the Arlington Street entrance. A man at the newsstand got a good profile of him with a buttonhole Minox. When Bond went down the shallow steps to the street and asked the commissionaire for a taxi, a Canonflex with a telescopic lens clicked away busily from a Red Roses laundry van at the neighbouring goods entrance and, in due course, the same van followed Bond's taxi while a man inside the van reported briefly to the Action Room of the Special Branch.

No. 44 Kensington Cloisters was a dull Victorian

mansion in grimy red brick. It had been chosen for its purpose because it had once been the headquarters of the Empire League for Noise Abatement, and its entrance still bore the brass plate of this long-defunct organisation, the empty shell of which had been purchased by the Secret Service through the Commonwealth Relations Office. It also had a spacious old-fashioned basement, re-equipped as detention cells, and a rear exit into a quiet mews.

The Red Roses laundry van watched the front door shut behind James Bond and then moved off at a sedate speed to its garage not far from Scotland Yard while the process of developing the Canonflex film went on in its interior.

‘Appointment with Major Townsend,’ said Bond.

‘Yes. He’s expecting you, sir. Shall I take your rain-coat?’ The powerful-looking doorman put the coat on a coat hanger and hung it up on one of a row of hooks beside the door. As soon as Bond was safely closeted with Major Townsend, the coat would go swiftly to the laboratory on the first floor where its provenance would be established from an examination of the fabric. Pocket dust would be removed for more leisurely research. ‘Would you follow me, sir?’

It was a narrow corridor of freshly painted clap-board with a tall, single window which concealed the Fluoroscope triggered automatically from beneath the ugly patterned carpet. The findings of its X-ray eye would be fed into the laboratory above the passage. The passage ended in two facing doors marked ‘A’ and

‘B’. The doorman knocked on Room B and stood aside for Bond to enter.

It was a pleasant, very light room, close-carpeted in dove-grey Wilton. The military prints on the cream walls were expensively framed. A small, bright fire burned under an Adam mantelpiece which bore a number of silver trophies and two photographs in leather frames – one of a nice-looking woman and the other of three nice-looking children. There was a central table with a bowl of flowers and two comfortable club chairs on either side of the fire. No desk or filing cabinets, nothing official-looking. A tall man, as pleasant as the room, got up from the far chair, dropped *The Times* on the carpet beside it and came forward with a welcoming smile. He held out a firm, dry hand.

This was the Soft Man.

‘Come in. Come in. Take a pew. Cigarette? Not the ones I seem to remember you favour. Just the good old Senior Service.’

Major Townsend had carefully prepared the loaded remark – a reference to Bond’s liking for the Morland Specials with the three gold rings. He noted Bond’s apparent lack of comprehension. Bond took a cigarette and accepted a light. They sat down facing one another. Major Townsend crossed his legs comfortably. Bond sat up straight. Major Townsend said, ‘Well now. How can I help you?’

Across the corridor, in Room A, a cold Office of Works cube with no furniture but a hissing gas-fire, an ugly desk with two facing wooden chairs under the

naked neon, Bond's reception by the Hard Man, the ex-police superintendent ('ex' because of a brutality case in Glasgow for which he had taken the rap) would have been very different. There, the man who went under the name of Mr Robson would have given him the full intimidation treatment – harsh, bullying interrogation, threats of imprisonment for false representation and God knows what else, and, perhaps, if he had shown signs of hostility or developing a nuisance value, a little judicious roughing-up in the basement.

Such was the ultimate sieve which sorted out the wheat from the chaff from those members of the public who desired access to 'The Secret Service'. There were other people in the building who dealt with the letters. Those written in pencil or in multicoloured inks, and those enclosing a photograph, remained unanswered. Those which threatened or were litigious were referred to the Special Branch. The solid, serious ones were passed, with a comment from the best graphologist in the business, to the Liaison Section at Headquarters for 'further action'. Parcels went automatically, and fast, to the Bomb Disposal Squad at Knightsbridge Barracks. The eye of the needle was narrow. On the whole, it discriminated appropriately. It was an expensive set-up, but it is the first duty of a Secret Service to remain not only secret but secure.

There was no reason why James Bond, who had always been on the operative side of the business, should know anything about the entrails of the Service, any more than he should have understood the mysteries of

the plumbing or electricity supply of his flat in Chelsea, or the working of his own kidneys. Colonel Boris, however, had known the whole routine. The secret services of all the great powers know the public face of their opponents, and Colonel Boris had very accurately described the treatment that James Bond must expect before he was 'cleared' and was allowed access to the office of his former chief.

So now James Bond paused before he replied to Major Townsend's question about how he could be of help. He looked at the Soft Man and then into the fire. He added up the accuracy of the description he had been given of Major Townsend's appearance and, before he said what he had been told to say, he gave Colonel Boris ninety out of a hundred. The big, friendly face, the wide-apart, pale brown eyes, bracketed by the wrinkles of a million smiles, the military moustache, the rimless monocle dangling from a thin black cord, the brushed-back, thinning sandy hair, the immaculate double-breasted blue suit, stiff white collar and Brigade tie – it was all there. But what Colonel Boris hadn't said was that the friendly eyes were as cold and steady as gun barrels and that the lips were thin and scholarly.

James Bond said patiently, 'It's really quite simple. I'm who I say I am. I'm doing what I naturally would do, and that's report back to M.'

'Quite. But you must realise' (a sympathetic smile) 'that you've been out of contact for nearly a year. You've been officially posted as "missing believed killed". Your obituary has even appeared in *The Times*. Have you

any evidence of identity? I admit that you look very much like your photographs, but you must see that we have to be very sure before we pass you on up the ladder.'

'A Miss Mary Goodnight was my secretary. She'd recognise me all right. So would dozens of other people at HQ.'

'Miss Goodnight's been posted abroad. Can you give me a brief description of HQ, just the main geography?'

Bond did so.

'Right. Now, who was a Miss Maria Freudenstadt?'

'Was?'

'Yes, she's dead.'

'Thought she wouldn't last long. She was a double, working for the KGB. Section 100 controlled her. I wouldn't get any thanks for telling you any more.'

Major Townsend had been primed with this very top-secret question. He had been given the answer, more or less as Bond had put it. This was the clincher. This *had* to be James Bond. 'Well, we're getting on fine. Now, it only remains to find out where you've come from and where you've been all these months and I won't keep you any longer.'

'Sorry. I can only tell that to M personally.'

'I see.' Major Townsend put on a thoughtful expression. 'Well, just let me make a telephone call or two and I'll see what can be done.' He got to his feet. 'Seen today's *Times*?' He picked it up and handed it to Bond. It had been specially treated to give good prints. Bond took it. 'Shan't be long.'

Major Townsend shut the door behind him and went across the passage and through the door marked 'A' where he knew that 'Mr Robson' would be alone. 'Sorry to bother you, Fred. Can I use your scrambler?' The chunky man behind the desk grunted through the stem of his pipe and remained bent over the midday *Evening Standard* racing news.

Major Townsend picked up the green receiver and was put through to the Laboratory. 'Major Townsend speaking. Any comment?' He listened, carefully, said 'Thank you' and got through to the Chief Security Officer at Headquarters. 'Well, sir, I think it must be 007. Bit thinner than his photographs. I'll be giving you his prints as soon as he's gone. Wearing his usual rig – dark blue single-breasted suit, white shirt, thin black knitted silk tie, black casuals – but they all look brand new. Raincoat bought yesterday from Burberry's. Got the Freudenstadt question right, but says he won't say anything about himself except to M personally. But whoever he is, I don't like it much. He fluffed on his special cigarettes. He's got an odd sort of glazed, sort of faraway look, and the "Scope" shows that he's carrying a gun in his right-hand coat pocket – curious sort of contraption, doesn't seem to have got a butt to it. I'd say he's a sick man. I wouldn't personally recommend that M should see him, but I wouldn't know how we're to get him to talk unless he does.' He paused. 'Very good, sir. I'll stay by the telephone. I'm on Mr Robson's extension.'

There was silence in the room. The two men didn't get

on well together. Major Townsend gazed into the gas-fire, wondering about the man next door. The telephone burred. 'Yes, sir? Very good, sir. Would your secretary send along a car from the pool? Thank you, sir.'

Bond was sitting in the same upright posture, *The Times* still unopened in his hand. Major Townsend said cheerfully, 'Well, that's fixed. Message from M that he's tremendously relieved you're all right and he'll be free in about half an hour. Car should be here in ten minutes or so. And the Chief of Staff says he hopes you'll be free for lunch afterwards.'

James Bond smiled for the first time. It was a thin smile which didn't light up his eyes. He said, 'That's very kind of him. Would you tell him I'm afraid I shan't be free.'