

Foreword

I have never much liked the phrase “continuation novel” although I have written five of them myself (three Bond, two Sherlock Holmes). The work of the newly commissioned author is so much more than continuing what has been done before. It’s a delicate balancing act. You’re inhabiting the world of a master thriller writer – and there are few greater than Ian Fleming – but your first aim is to carve out fresh territory. A large part of your job is imitation and yet it’s vital that you find ways to be original. You are not writing in your own voice. In many respects, what is being asked for is an act of ventriloquism but at the same time you can’t just be the dummy sitting on somebody’s knee. It is not entirely your book but you still have to own it.

You are also entering dangerous territory. There are thousands of readers who are passionate about the original works and who are wary of any interloper who may step out of line. James Bond is such a worldwide icon that, writing your own novel, you have the feeling that you are tip-toeing into a sacred temple . . . as indeed Bond does in the book you are about to read.

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The reviewers are waiting in the shadows, ready to bite. When *Colonel Sun* was published in March, 1968, it received frankly mixed reviews. “Neither vintage Fleming nor vintage Amis,” was one of the less savage put-downs from Malcolm Bradbury in the *Guardian* while in the *TLS*, Simon Grey went further, describing Amis’s Bond as “a chuckle-headed imposter.”

I beg to disagree. I have always considered *Colonel Sun* to be the best non-Fleming Bond ever written. It may have its problems and we’ll come to those, but if we’re going to focus on the positives, let’s start with the title. Ian Fleming’s titles are so brilliant that many of them have passed into the English language. *Live and Let Die*. *From Russia with Love*. *You Only Live Twice*. When I was writing my own books, I cursed the fact that Kingsley Amis, writing as Robert Markham, had grabbed both a rank and a planet, bringing them together so simply and memorably. (The Bond film, *Die Another Day*, tried it again with a character called General Moon but for some reason that’s not nearly as good.)

The chapter headings also echo Ian Fleming perfectly, starting with the bland but somehow threatening opener – ‘The Man in Sunglasses’ – to the punning ‘Not-So-Safe-House’ and, my favourite, “General Incompetence”, introducing a foolish Russian commander. With the introduction of Ariadne Alexandrou, we have a smart, effective Bond heroine who gives as good as she gets, reflecting Bond’s own snobbery about food and drink (“Nobody dines at the Grande Bretagne unless they have to . . . I’ll take you somewhere where they have

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real Greek food.”) and holding her own when it comes to the action. The early chase sequence at the Acropolis seals the deal – with Amis cheerfully unimpressed by “the most beautiful building in the world”.

Everything is in place from the pulse-racing opening, in which M is kidnapped from his own home and Bond, hopelessly overpowered and drugged, has to find a way to get help. Kingsley Amis gets everything right. Not just the action and the insider’s knowledge (“In the next minute he proved how difficult it is even for two strong, skilful and determined men to render a third equally powerful man completely helpless if they are not allowed to inflict anything really violent and ruthless upon him”) but the ingenuity with which Bond works out what’s going on and manages to survive. This terrific sequence ends with an unexpected touch of pathos as Bond reflects on the death of two faithful servants whose loyalty goes all the way back to the war. By the time Bond leaves for Greece and uncovers a plot to disrupt a major peace conference, you know you are in safe hands.

But then Kingsley Amis was no stranger to the world of Britain’s greatest spy. Three years before, he had published *The James Bond Dossier* which had begun life as a newspaper article but had expanded into a guide to the man and his world which never left my side when I was writing about Bond. He had been consulted by Fleming’s publishers to read and possibly even edit the last novel, *The Man with the Golden Gun* following Ian Fleming’s death on 12 August 1964. It was obvious that if there was to be

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a new novel about James Bond, Kingsley Amis should be the first choice.

Except he wasn't.

Glidrose Publications (now Ian Fleming Publications) had been set up by Fleming to handle his literary rights and they first approached James Leasor, a hugely popular thriller writer at the time and the creator of Dr Jason Love, hero of *Passport to Oblivion*. He turned them down. A South African writer called Geoffrey Jenkins also claimed that Fleming had discussed a new story with him and went ahead with the ill-titled *Per Fine Ounce*. I've only seen one page of it ("‘Finger-on-the-tit stuff,’ murmured Bond") and I'm not surprised that Glidrose rejected it. In the end, Amis, writing under the pseudonym of Robert Markham, was given the job.

Colonel Sun attracted controversy from the very start. Ann Fleming, Ian's widow, was strongly opposed to it. "No one understands why I am distressed," she wrote to Evelyn Waugh. "Though I do not admire Bond he was Ian's creation and should not be commercialised to this extent." She also lambasted Kingsley Amis. "I think Amis should publish under his own name and show the world his left-wing intellectual pretensions were easily turned to money-grubbing like everyone else." For his part, Amis was unphased: "Why do I do it? Well, yes, I do intend to make quite a lot of money out of the venture and jolly good luck to me."

He may not have been entirely serious. After all, he had written a fast-paced, convincing and original thriller

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with a genuinely terrifying villain – as good as any in the canon.

That said though, the *Guardian* newspaper marked the fiftieth anniversary of the book with an article by John Dugdale in which he described Colonel Sun Liang-tan as “the most repellent racial caricature of all, a descendant of Fu Manchu and other fiendish orientals.” Well, I can play the usual get-out clause: different times, different attitudes. There are many characters in the Bond canon that we now find contentious. But I suppose, as much as it pains me, I must issue something close to a trigger warning and admit that Dugdale may have a point. I just hope they don’t put it on the cover.

Dugdale also criticises Amis for the “protracted, gruesome torture scene” at the climax of the book (in Chapter 19). Well, the very first Bond novel, *Casino Royale* had a memorable, very violent interrogation scene so you could argue that there’s nothing out of place here. The chapter has some great dialogue and a cunning premise: Colonel Sun delicately explains that he will only use items “that the average kitchen provides”. From his very first appearance on a Greek island (“In the darkness, the pewter-coloured eyes grew fixed”), Sun has radiated evil and in some respects he prefigures Hannibal Lecter, another remorseless yet somehow compelling psychopath. Again, I’ll be honest and say that the torture scene does not make for a pleasant read. I think Amis goes too far and the turn-around at the end is, to say the least, unexpected.

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You have been warned! But historically, artistically and thematically, it's my view that *Colonel Sun* more than earns its place in the Bond canon. Curiously, it is the only continuation novel that has been used in the billion-dollar film franchise. The torture scene I have just described appears, with some of Amis's original dialogue, in the 2015 Daniel Craig outing, *Spectre*. Just one scene – but that in itself says something.

Read the book and be assured – it will stay with you.

Anthony Horowitz
July 2023

Introduction

I wrote this book, sidestepping out of my career as a straight novelist for the occasion, because I was asked to do so and because I found the project irresistible. When Ian Fleming died before his time in 1964, it was felt that James Bond was too popular a figure to be allowed to follow him. Who was around that might provide a passable successor to the Fleming canon?

No doubt I seemed as likely a lad as most. My last novel under my own name had had bits of espionage in it. More to the point, I had published in 1965 what was intended as a light-hearted and sympathetic survey of the original thirteen volumes, *The James Bond Dossier*, most of it written before Fleming's death and approved by him in all but three tiny details, which I corrected. And, as I said, I could not wait to try it.

Quite soon I had the makings of a plot, though just as with my other novels I have never been able to remember what order they turned up in. But the matter of setting, of *where*, so important in all Bond's adventures, must have arisen and been decided early on. He had never yet operated in mainland Greece, let alone

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the islands, any more than I had, but then I had an American mate, bilingual in Greek, who had already promised to show me everything from the Acropolis in Athens (and Dionysos' restaurant overlooking it) to Rhodes across the strait from Turkey (and squid and ouzo on the waterfront).

And so he did, and more. Before starting off, I already knew a good deal about the question *why* – why Bond must go to Greece. Well, the villainous Colonel Sun, on mission from his adventure-minded masters, the Red Chinese, is on an Aegean island plotting a blow not only against the West in general and Greece in particular, but against Russia (so Bond gets a Russian girl assistant). Also, M is there, not by choice, and one good reason for his presence is my having noticed on the map that his house in Windsor Park is only a few miles by back roads from London Airport, so anybody planning to kidnap him and smuggle him out of the country . . .

It took me two trips, of course, to Athens and Piraeus and past Cape Sounion to the Cyclades island group, Kea, Kithnos, Serifos, Sifnos, Paros, Naxos, Ios, among the last three of which I placed my invented island, Vrakonisi. The first trip was to pick up ideas, the second to get the details right, essential in any Bond novel. It was no trouble at all to find the best olives, the best shellfish, the best local wine, and the sun, the sea and the islands would have filled a dozen notebooks. We went in a fifty-foot converted fishing-boat called the *Altair*, the twin and namesake of the one in the book,

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and there was a certain amount to be said of that vessel and that experience. (Catch me trying it today, in those treacherous waters.)

I eked out this kind of material with the secret-service jargon and supposed organizational background I had soaked in from my reading of Fleming and of certain factual pamphlets. There was one useful field I knew in detail and at first hand: some of the infantry weaponry of the Second World War. So in *Colonel Sun* a goodie shoots a baddie not with a contemporary repeating weapon but with a more accurate Lee-Enfield bolt-action rifle, and the heroine wields a Thompson sub-machine gun, a piece I renewed acquaintance with when the real *Altair* turned out to have a working specimen in its locker – ‘in Greece, you never know,’ said the captain.

But the James Bond of *Dr No* or *Goldfinger* would have needed far more in the way of technical expertise than I could supply. Amis-style Bond found himself attacking the enemy with hand-grenades or a hunting-knife, bolting sausages and fruit before the night assault, going in for the kill on his own two feet. No hovercraft, no helicopters, no rockets, and no double portions of Beluga caviare served in candlelit restaurants by white-jacketed waiters. He finds no use for the picklock and baby transmitter and the rest of the gadgets supplied by Q Branch on his departure. His own strength, determination and ingenuity are enough.

The contrast is less with the original Bond, the real

Bond of the Fleming novels, than with the Bond of the films, that rakish nonentity who drops yobbo-style throwaways out of the corner of his mouth before or after escaping by personal jet-pack or submersible car fitted with missile-launchers or (any moment) reactor-powered iceberg. The most ludicrous divergence yet is that between the book of *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1962), about how a nice Canadian girl down on her luck is rescued from a couple of small-time hoods by a decent English copper called James Bond, and the film of that title (1977), which has a psychopath trying to start World War III by hijacking US and Russian submarines, and Bond being incredibly active in stopping him.

Fleming's Bond found plenty of time to be active (and more believably and so more thrillingly) in the intervals of behaving like a recognizable human being. No one would call him one of the great character-portraits of English literature, but he is much more of a person than the mere 'silhouette' his creator disparagingly called him. Tough, yes, resourceful, all that, but fully capable of indignation, compunction, remorse, tenderness and a protective instinct towards defenceless creatures, see for example 'The Hildebrand Rarity' and *Thunderball*. And so his adventures are much more interesting than the adolescent fantasies of the cinematic 'James Bond'.

It seems right to end this with thoughts of Ian Fleming, who was a masterly action-story writer in the tradition of Conan Doyle and John Buchan. I for one found it

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beyond me to follow worthily in his footsteps, but I am honoured to have been given the chance of trying, and found it all great fun.

Kingsley Amis
London 1991

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A Man in Sunglasses

James Bond stood at the middle tees of the eighteenth on the Sunningdale New Course, enjoying the tranquil normality of a sunny English afternoon in early September. The Old Course, he considered, with its clumps of majestic oak and pine, was charmingly landscaped, but something in his nature responded to the austerity of the New: more lightly wooded, open to the sky, patches of heather and thin scrub on the sandy soil – and, less subjectively, a more testing series of holes. Bond was feeling mildly pleased with himself for having taken no more than a four at the notoriously tricky dogleg sixth, where a touch of slice in the drive was likely to land you in a devilish morass of bushes and marshy hummocks. He had managed a clear two hundred and fifty yards straight down the middle, a shot that had demanded every ounce of effort without (blessed relief) the slightest complaint from the area where, last summer, Scaramanga's Derringer slug had torn through his abdomen.

Near by, waiting for the four ahead of them to move on to the green, was Bond's opponent and incidentally

his best friend in the Secret Service: Bill Tanner, M's Chief of Staff. Noticing the deep lines of strain round Tanner's eyes, his almost alarming pallor, Bond had taken the opportunity of an unusually quiet morning at Headquarters to talk him into a trip down to this sleepy corner of Surrey. They had lunched first at Scott's in Coventry Street, beginning with a dozen each of the new season's Whitstable oysters and going on to cold silverside of beef and potato salad, accompanied by a well-chilled bottle of Anjou rosé. Not perhaps the ideal prelude to a round of golf, even a little self-indulgent. But Bond had recently heard that the whole north side of the street was doomed to demolition, and counted every meal taken in those severe but comfortable panelled rooms as a tiny victory over the new, hateful London of steel-and-glass matchbox architecture, flyovers and underpasses, and the endless hysterical clamour of pneumatic drills.

The last of the four, caddie in attendance, was plodding up to the green. Tanner stepped to his trolley – having some minor Service shop to exchange, they were transporting their clubs themselves – and pulled out the new Ben Hogan driver he had been yearning for weeks to try out. Then, with characteristic deliberation, he squared up to his ball. Nothing beyond a nominal fiver hung on this game, but it was not Bill Tanner's way to pursue any objective with less than the maximum of his ability – a trait that had made him the best Number Two in the business.

The sun beat down. Insects were droning in the little belt of brambles, rowans and silver birch saplings to

their left. Bond's gaze shifted from the lean, intent figure of the Chief of Staff to the putting green a quarter of a mile away, the famous, ancient oak by the eighteenth green of the Old Course, the motionless line of parked cars. Was this the right sort of life? – an unexacting game of golf with a friend, to be followed in due time by a leisurely drive back to London (avoiding the M4), a light dinner alone in the flat, a few hands of piquet with another friend – 016 of Station B, home from West Berlin on ten days' leave – and bed at eleven thirty. It was certainly a far more sensible and grown-up routine than the round of gin and tranquillizers he had been trapped in only a couple of years back, before his nightmare odyssey through Japan and the USSR. He should be patting himself on the back for having come through that sticky patch. And yet . . .

With the sound of a plunging sabre, Bill Tanner's driver flashed through the still, warm air and his ball, after seeming to pass out of existence for an instant, reappeared on its soaring arc, a beautiful tall shot sufficiently drawn to take him well to the left of the clump of Scotch pines that had brought many a promising score to grief at the last minute. As things stood he had only to halve the hole to win.

'It looks like your fiver, I'm sorry to say, Bill.'

'About time I took one off you.'

As James Bond stepped forward in his turn, the thought crossed his mind that there might be a worse sin than the cardinal one of boredom. Complacency.

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Satisfaction with the second-rate. Going soft without knowing it.

The man wearing the rather unusually large and opaque sunglasses had no difficulty, as he sauntered past the open windows of the club lounge towards the putting green, in identifying the tall figure now shaping up to drive off the eighteenth tee. He had had plenty of practice in identifying it over the past few weeks, at greater distances than this. And at the moment his vision was sharpened by urgency.

If any member had marked out the man in sunglasses as a stranger and approached him with inquiring offers of help, he would have been answered courteously in a faintly non-British accent – not foreign exactly, perhaps South African – to the effect that no help was needed. Any moment now, the stranger would have explained, he expected to be joined by Mr John Donald to discuss with him the possibilities of being put up for membership. (Mr John Donald was in fact in Paris, as a couple of carefully placed telephone calls had established earlier that day.) But, as it turned out, nobody went near the man in sunglasses. Nobody so much as noticed him. This was not surprising, because a long course of training, costing a large sum of money, had seen to it that he was very good at not being noticed.

The man strolled across the putting green and seemed to be examining, with exactly average interest, the magnificent display flower-bed and its thick ranks

of red-hot pokers and early chrysanthemums. His demeanour was perfectly relaxed, his face quite expressionless, as the eyes behind the glasses looked in the direction of the flowers. His mind, however, was racing. Today's operation had been set up three times already, before being abandoned at the eleventh hour. There was a date schedule on it so tight that further postponement might mean the cancellation of the entire scheme. This would have greatly displeased him. He very much wanted the operation to go through, not for any fancy idealistic or political reason, but simply out of professional pride. What was being undertaken would, if all went well, end up as the most staggeringly audacious piece of lawlessness he had ever heard of. To be associated with the success of such a project would certainly bring him advancement from his employers. Whereas to be associated with its failure . . .

The man in sunglasses drew his arms in to his sides for a moment, as if the approach of evening had brought a stray gust of air that suddenly struck chill. The moment passed. He had no trouble making himself relax again. He considered dispassionately the undeniable fact that the time schedule he was working to was even tighter than the date schedule, and was showing signs of coming apart. Events were running half an hour late. The man Bond and his companion had lingered hoggishly over their lunch in the rich aristocrats' restaurant. It would be very awkward if they lingered over the drinks these people felt bound to consume around this hour.

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A casual glance showed that the two Englishmen had finished their round of infantile play and were approaching the club house. The man in sunglasses, his eyes invisible behind the dark lenses, watched side-long until, laughing inanely together, they had passed out of sight. No further delay had occurred. Although he had not looked at his watch for half an hour, and did not do so now, he knew the correct time to within a minute.

A pause. Silence but for a few distant voices, an engine being started in the car park, a jet aircraft in a distant corner of the sky. Somewhere a clock struck. The man went through a tiny underplayed pantomime of somebody deciding regretfully that he really cannot be kept waiting any longer. Then he walked off at an easy pace towards the entrance. As he neared the road he took off his sunglasses and slipped them carefully into the top jacket pocket of his anonymous light-grey suit. His eyes, of a washed-out blue that went oddly with his dead black hair, had the controlled interestedness of a sniper's as he reaches for his rifle.

'Do you think I'm going soft, Bill?' asked Bond twenty minutes later as they stood at the bar.

Bill Tanner grinned. 'Still sore about ending up two down?' (Bond had missed a four-foot putt on the last green.)

'It isn't that, it's . . . Look, to start with I'm under-employed. What have I done this year? One trip to the States, on what turns out to be a sort of discourtesy

visit, and then that miserable flop out East back in June.'

Bond had been sent to Hong Kong to supervise the conveying to the Red mainland of a certain Chinese and a number of unusual stores. The man had gone missing about the time of Bond's arrival and had been found two days later in an alley off the waterfront with his head almost severed from his body. After another three days, memorable chiefly for a violent and prolonged typhoon, the plan had been cancelled and Bond recalled.

'It wasn't your fault that our rep. went sick before you turned up,' said Tanner, falling automatically into the standard Service jargon for use in public.

'No.' Bond stared into his gin and tonic. 'But what worries me is that I didn't seem to mind much. In fact I was quite relieved at being spared the exertion. There's something wrong somewhere.'

'Not physically, anyway. You're in better shape than I've seen you for years.'

Bond looked round the unpretentious room with its comfortable benches in dark-blue leather, its decorous little groups of business and professional men – quiet men, decent men, men who had never behaved violently or treacherously in their lives. Admirable men: but the thought of becoming indistinguishable from them was suddenly repugnant.

'It's ceasing to be an individual that's deadly,' said Bond thoughtfully. 'Becoming a creature of habit. Since I got back I've been coming down here about three Tuesdays out of four, arriving at the same sort of time,

going round with one or other of the same three friends, leaving at six thirty or so, driving home each time for the same sort of evening. And seeing nothing wrong with it. A man in my line of business shouldn't work to a timetable. You understand that.'

It is true that a secret agent on an assignment must never fall into any kind of routine that will enable the opposition to predict his movements, but it was not until later that Bill Tanner was to appreciate the curious unintentional significance of what Bond was saying.

'I don't quite follow, James. It doesn't apply to your life in England, surely,' said Tanner, speaking with equally unintentional irony.

'I was thinking of the picture as a whole. My existence is falling into a pattern. I must find some way of breaking out of it.'

'In my experience that sort of shake-up comes along of its own accord when the time is ripe. No need to do anything about it yourself.'

'Fate or something?'

Tanner shrugged. 'Call it what you like.'

For a moment there was an odd silence between the two men. Then Tanner glanced at the clock, drained his glass and said briskly, 'Well, I suppose you'll want to be getting along.'

On the point of agreeing, Bond checked himself. 'To hell with it,' he said. 'If I'm going to get myself disorganized I might as well start now.'

He turned to the barmaid. 'Let's have those again, Dot.'

‘Won’t you be late for M?’ asked Tanner.

‘He’ll just have to possess his soul in patience. He doesn’t dine till eight fifteen, and half an hour or so of his company is quite enough these days.’

‘Don’t I know it,’ said Tanner feelingly. ‘I still can’t get near him at the office. We’ve taken to doing most of our confabulating over the intercom and that suits me fine. I’ve only to say it looks like rain for him to shout at me to stop fussing round him like a confounded old woman.’

It was a life-like imitation and Bond laughed, but he was serious enough when he said, ‘It’s only natural. Sailors hate being ill.’

The previous winter M had developed a distressing cough which he had testily refused to do anything about, saying that the damn thing would clear up when the warmer weather came. But the spring and early summer had brought rain and humidity as well as warmth, and the cough had not cleared up. One morning in July Miss Money Penny had taken in a sheaf of signals to find M sprawled semi-conscious over his desk, grey in the face and fighting for breath. She had summoned Bond from his fifth-floor office and, at the angry insistence of the headquarters M.O., M had been bundled half by force into his old Silver Wraith Rolls and escorted home. After three weeks in bed under the devoted care of ex-Chief Petty Officer Hammond and his wife, M had largely recovered from his bronchial congestion, though his temper – as Bond had amply discovered on his periodic visits – looked like taking longer to heal

. . . Since then, Bond had taken to breaking his weekly return journey from Sunningdale by looking in at Quarterdeck, the beautiful little Regency manor-house on the edge of Windsor Park, ostensibly for an informal chat about the affairs of the Service but really to keep an eye on M's health, to have a sly word with the Hammonds and find out whether the old man was following the M.O.'s orders, getting plenty of rest and, in particular, laying off his pipe and his daily couple of poisonous black cheroots. He had been prepared for a characteristic explosion from M when he suggested the first of these visits, but as it was, M had growled an immediate, if surly, assent. Bond suspected he felt rather cut off from the world by being, among other things, temporarily condemned to a three-day working week. (The M.O. had only won that concession by threatening to send him on a cruise unless he agreed.)

Bond now said, 'Why don't you come along too, Bill? Then I could give you a lift back to London.'

Tanner hesitated. 'I don't think I will, James, thanks all the same. There's a rather important call from Station L coming through to the office later on which I'd like to take personally.'

'What's the Duty Officer for? You're doing the best part of two men's work as it is.'

'Well . . . it isn't only that. I'll give M a miss anyway. There's something about that house of his that gives me the creeps.'

A quarter of an hour later, having dropped the Chief of Staff at the railway station, Bond swung the long

bonnet of his Continental Bentley left off the A30. Ahead of him was the pleasant, leisurely drive of ten minutes or so that would bring him, via twisting minor roads, to Quarterdeck.

The man who had been watching Bond earlier sat in a stolen Ford Zephyr, unobtrusively parked fifty yards from the turning. He now spoke a single word into his Hitachi solid-state transceiver. Four and half miles away, another man acknowledged with a monosyllable, switched off his own instrument, and emerged with his two companions from the dense woodland thicket where they had been lying for the past two hours.

The occupant of the Zephyr sat quite still for another minute. It was his nature to avoid unnecessary movement even at moments like the present when he was as tense as he ever allowed himself to become. The timetable of the operation was now fifty minutes in arrears. One more major delay would entail, not merely cancellation, but disaster, for the step his radio signal had just initiated was as irreversible as it was violent. But there would not be another delay. None was inherently present in the situation. His training told him so.

At the end of the minute, calculated after careful research as the optimum interval for following in the wake of the Bentley, he put the Zephyr in gear and started for the turning.

Bond crossed the county boundary into Berkshire and made his unhurried way among the ugly rash of modern housing – half-heartedly mock-Tudor villas, bungalows and two-storey boxes with a senseless variegation of

planking, brick and crazy paving on the front of each and the inevitable TV aerial sprouting from every roof. Once through Silwood village and across the A329 these signs of affluence were behind him and the Bentley thrummed down a gentle slope between pine-woods. Soon there were lush open farmlands on his left and the forest established in force on his right. Places like this would last longest as memorials of what England had once been. As if to contradict this idea, there appeared ahead of him a B.E.A. Trident newly taken off from London Airport, full of tourists bearing their fish-and-chip culture to the Spanish resorts, to Portugal's lovely Algarve province, and now, as the range of development schemes grew ever wider, as far as Morocco. But it was churlish to resent all this and the rising wage-levels that made it possible. Forget it. Concentrate on cheering M up. And on tonight's piquet session. Raise the stakes and gamble in earnest. Or scrub it altogether. A couple of telephone calls and a night out for four. Break free of the pattern . . .

These thoughts ran into Bond's head as he carried out almost mechanically all the minute drills of good driving, including, of course, an occasional glance at his rear-view mirror. Not once did the Zephyr appear there. Bond would have paid no particular attention if it had. He had never seen it before, would not have recognized its driver even if brought face to face with him. Although he had been under close surveillance for over six weeks, Bond had noticed nothing out of the ordinary. When not on an assignment abroad, a secret

agent does not expect to be watched. It is also much easier to watch a man who keeps regular hours and has a fixed domicile and place of business. Thus, for instance, it had not been necessary to set up any kind of checkpoint at Bond's flat off the King's Road, nor to follow him between there and Service headquarters in Regent's Park. More important, the operation involving him was regarded by its planners as of the highest priority. This meant a lavish budget, which meant in turn that an unusually large number of agents could be employed. And that meant that watchers and followers could be changed frequently, before the repeated presence of any one of them had time to register on that almost subconscious alarm system which years of secret work had developed in Bond's mind.

The Bentley slid across the Windsor-Bagshot road. The familiar landmarks came up on the left: the Squirrel public house, the stables of the Arabian stud, the Lurex thread factory (often a focal point of M's indignation). Now, on the right, the modest stone gateway of Quarterdeck, the short, beautifully kept gravel drive, and the house itself, a plain rectangle of Bath stone weathered to a faintly greenish grey, luminous under the evening sun, shadowed in parts by the dense plantation of pine, beech, silver birch and young oak that grew on three sides of it. An ancient wistaria straggled up to and beyond the tiny first-floor balcony on to which the windows of M's bedroom opened. As he slammed the car door and moved towards the shallow portico, Bond fancied he caught a flicker of movement

behind those windows: Mrs Hammond, no doubt, turning down the bed.

Under Bond's hand, the hanging brass bell of a long-defunct ship of the line pealed out sharply in the stillness. Silence followed, unbroken by the least rustle of air through the tree-tops. Bond pictured Mrs Hammond still busy upstairs, Hammond himself in the act of fetching a bottle of M's favourite Algerian wine – the aptly named 'Infuriator' – from the cellar. The front door of Quarterdeck was never latched between sunrise and sunset. It yielded at once to Bond's touch.

Every house has its own normally imperceptible background noise, compounded it may be of distant voices, footfalls, kitchen sounds, all the muted bustle of human beings about their business. James Bond was hardly across the threshold when his trained senses warned him of the total absence of any such noise. Suddenly taut, he pushed open the solid Spanish mahogany door of the study, where M habitually received company.

The empty room gazed bleakly at Bond. As always, everything was meticulously in its place, the lines of naval prints exactly horizontal on the walls, water-colour materials laid out as if for inspection on the painting-table up against the window. It all had a weirdly artificial, detached air, like part of a museum where the furniture and effects of some historic figure are preserved just as they were in his lifetime.

Before Bond could do more than look, listen and wonder, the door of the dining-room across the hall,

which had been standing ajar, was thrown briskly open and a man emerged. Pointing a long-barrelled automatic in the direction of Bond's knees, he said in a clear voice:

‘Stay right there, Bond. And don't make any sudden movements. If you do I shall maim you very painfully.’