

A Double Life

by Frederic Raphael

Chapter One

One evening, when I was *en poste* in Buenos Aires, during the late 1960s, I was invited to a reception at the British Embassy. General de Gaulle was still resisting Britain's application to join the European Community; Anglo-French relations were tense, even as far away as the Argentine. Before we left the Embassy, it was agreed that my Ambassador, Pierre-Henri Mercuès, would play the hard line, while I gave off-the-record hints that a compromise was bound, in the long run, to be reached. The purpose of our duplicity was not so much to confuse the British as to leave evidence that, whatever the eventual outcome, it was a triumph for French diplomacy. Whether Mercuès or I proved to have made the correct forecast, France would maintain her reputation as a leader of the world's game.

It was a September evening at the beginning of Argentina's least amiable season. The rich had closed their villas in Punta del Este and had returned to the capital. Their faces darkened from weeks on the Uruguayan beach, the Punteños now welcomed the opportunity, even as they complained about the cold, to display their furs and their Harrods cashmere. After I had done my duty at the reception, I went into one of the downstairs anterooms in the British Embassy to recover my coat. It had been hung in the furthest recesses of the double closet. In order to reach it, I was obliged to go deep inside. When two other diplomats entered the room, they assumed no one else to be present. As often happens, they began to talk more earnestly and more candidly on the verge of parting than they had during the public part of the evening. One was Henry Capel, the British Second Secretary; the other was a Belgian called Vincent Werstricht (*'notre Flamand'* as some of his colleagues called him). Vincent and I often played tennis at the

Marian college close to the suburb where we and the Werstrichts both rented houses with gardens suitable for children.

The two men were already talking about someone as they came in. There was conspiratorial glee in their dissection of his character. I gathered that he had characteristics in common with the then French foreign minister, who spoke English with a glacial competence which somehow conveyed his disdain for England. The Belgian, a gourmet who hated the fishy steaks of Argentina and whose rotundity did not interfere with smart movement around the tennis court, said that he suspected that the subject of their conversation used *vous* even when speaking to himself.

The Englishman said, 'Oh, he's such a snob that I don't find it easy to imagine him deigning to talk to himself at all!'

Such furtive malice was commonplace in the world of diplomacy. Obligated to see the same people over and over again, we were tempted to vary official effusiveness with covert spite; two faces are more entertaining than one. Even behind the scenes, what seemed to be purely personal relations were never wholly free from diplomatic considerations. If we were always nice to Africans, our off-the-record attitudes to other colleagues were often affected by what was happening thousands of miles away. Private affability could be exaggerated when our masters sought closer ties with certain countries; it might stiffen to frigidity when there was a coldness between our distant capitals. Among professionals, the cleverest blows are always struck after the bell.

As an inadvertent spy, I recognised that the Englishman and the Belgian were making a meal, or at least a snack, of the Frenchman for whom they seemed to share a common contempt. 'Don't you find it typical of the French,' Capel said, 'to consign public relations to someone with whom it would be difficult to imagine having relations of any kind?'

The Belgian laughed more heartily at this laborious epigram than it warranted, as if to prove that his country was capable of tact as well as waffles. 'What's so amusing about him,' he said, 'is that he confuses slyness with caution: if you ask him the time, he looks at you as if he wants to know whether you're buying or selling!'

Concealed among the more or less sumptuous street-wear of the

diplomatic community (the poorer the country, the grander the wardrobe), I pondered on which of my colleagues at the Embassy was being discussed. I attempted to supply a name to fill the bill, just as, when first glancing at a crossword puzzle, one makes a random conjecture before giving reasoned attention to its aptness to every part of the clue. When I heard a mention of 'Florentine deviousness', I suspected that my Ambassador was being accused of it, but then Mercuès was scarcely 'as thin as the end of de Gaulle's wedge'; nor did my bachelor chief have a wife who 'drank for two and fucked for no one'.

When, as they laughed, the Belgian said, 'Oh, I quite like Guy in a way,' I continued to try, with fatuous solemnity, to think who else on our staff, apart from myself, was called Guy and hence might qualify for their derision.

After I realised that I was their subject, I was neither mortified nor even offended. So far as they knew, I had not been privy to their conversation; hence I was able, when eventually I appreciated that I was its target, to feel that it did not touch me personally. I did not even dispute the accuracy of their aspersions on the character under whose name I conducted my life; I simply discovered that I was not identical with him. If I was capable of being wounded, it was not on account of what anyone thought about Guy de Roumegouse, the *chargé d'affaires* at the French Embassy, a career diplomat whose life was, to the common eye, indistinguishable from my own.

Oddly enough, I felt a new warmth towards my colleagues as I listened to them, quite as someone else might if he had by chance overheard an unexpected compliment. If I was not pleased to be taken for a dry stick, I felt a certain pride in having carried off a successful imposture. I may even have been a little drunk with it: instead of emerging, which might have temporarily put my fellow-diplomats at a disadvantage, but would almost certainly have blighted our future relations, I luxuriated in the cosy depths of the cupboard until they had collected their things, fortunately without disturbing me. I was so exhilarated that I removed what I assumed to be my own dark coat from its hanger and strolled out into the hallway.

My wife was at a cocktail party at the Plaza Hotel; I had said that I would join her there. I ambled through the streets, relishing the solitary anonymity. Although Buenos Aires is said to be the Paris of South America, its broad avenues — flowing between tall banks of masonry — never seemed very Parisian to me. The *Sandwicheries*, with their rolled *dobles* and *triples* cut longwise from the oily loaves, were tempting, but they never offered the seductions of a good *bistrot*. One can smell the sea in BA, when the breeze blows in from the estuary, but the Seine has another flavour entirely. Only the women, in their black dresses and their coquettishness, reminded me of Paris.

It was the hour when the rich moved about the city in their cars or strolled down the Calle Florida, looking in the expensive windows as though it needed only a surge of desire for them to buy whatever happened to be on show (no one could admit that the prices would cause him to hesitate). Two couples walked ahead of me towards the Plaza. The women wore furs and diamonds, their ostentatious defencelessness advertised the potency of the men who accompanied them. Were those two tight-buttocked females the men's wives? Their style was that of cocottes. When they pointed at the windows of a smart tailor's, I could hear them declaring that various articles — a vicuña coat in particular — would suit the men to perfection and that they really ought to indulge themselves. It was obvious that the women expected to be rewarded with new outfits at the same time; their encouragements were veiled demands. I was sufficiently interested in their diplomatic style to slow down and look in the window myself. The effect was quite alarming: I caught sight of a stranger, in a coat longer than mine, with velvet facings and quadruple buttons on the sleeves. The stranger was, of course, myself; in my curious state, after hearing Capel and Vincent Werstricht talking about me, I must have taken a coat adjacent to mine, and of similar cut.

I saw myself in the silvery light of the tailor's window and I wondered why I should never have acquired a coat of such elegance. It did not make me handsome, but it lent me a distinction I should never have chosen for myself. Filled with an unfamiliar, but almost irresistible sense of power and shamelessness, I told

myself that, of course, I should return at once to the British Embassy, where the owner of the coat I was wearing would, no doubt, be looking with irritation — if not scorn — at the one I had left in exchange. However, I determined to postpone the moment of rectitude. Feeling in the pockets of my new coat, I discovered that there was a set of keys in a small pocket inside the main one, on the right. In the main pocket, I found two torn tickets for a cinema; there was also a piece of paper, chaffed almost to dust, with a name and a half-effaced telephone number. In the left pocket, which I now searched with eager fingers, I discovered a folded receipt for repairs to a Mercedes. From this I learnt that my name should have been Rudolph Jurgens.

Disappointed to come upon no more revealing clues to the nature of the life lived by the person whose coat fitted me so much more sumptuously than my own, I straightened my shoulders and gazed with unaccustomed directness into the reflected eyes of one of the women who was admiring the vicuña coat. She looked at me quite as if she recognised me, or at least some quality which she supposed me to possess. For a moment, I learnt what it was to be fashionable rather than correct. I might have been left temporarily at the wheel of a sports car which I scarcely knew how to drive; her eyes credited me with a brio I did not own. I was reminded of the great Juan Fangio, who had been asked, in a recent interview in *La Prensa*, why — unlike most Argentinians — he drove so discreetly off the track; he had replied that he was never sure when he might meet someone who thought he was Juan Fangio coming the other way.

I am a person who, should he meet himself coming the other way, would be in small danger of being swept off the road. Yet I walked on down the Calle Florida, rather than turn back to retrieve my own coat, imagining that I was Rudolph Jurgens, a person of means who was not, so far as I knew, in the diplomatic service. Was he a German? Almost certainly, but he might be a business-man or a landowner whose presence in South America owed something to his history in a Reich some of whose leaders, as I had reason to know, had been astute enough to make alternative arrangements when their good days were coming to an end.

As I reached the curve of private drive that went in under the *porte cochère* of the Plaza Hotel, I saw the two couples had stopped in front of the windows of the jeweller and silversmith whose shop could also be reached from inside the lobby. One of the men was shaking his head at his woman, who turned away from him, with a petulant shrug, and looked directly at me. She was not, I thought, the same one who had eyed me before, but her attitude was of a piece with the other. I had an inkling of what it would be to find all women equally accessible and equally amenable.

I glanced away with a haughtiness which belonged less to me than to my coat and looked into the jeweller's window. As if with borrowed eyes, I saw a woman holding up a silver brooch which had coloured panels in it. She was talking as she inspected the merchandise, and the jeweller was humouring her. I thought that the customer looked rather discontented, but also rather attractive, in a slightly heavy fashion. When she took the piece of jewellery away from her face, she caught me looking at her and, still under the influence of the man I was dressed to be, I imagined a hint of cold encouragement in her manner. Then her expression changed, and so did mine: the woman was my wife and I, of course, was her husband.

When we met, in the lobby of the hotel, she remarked on the vulgarity of the coat I was wearing and advised me to return it as soon as possible. I went back to the British Embassy the following morning and informed Henry Capel of my stupidity. He took me to the closet in which I had hidden the night before and there, sure enough, was my own overcoat. Henry was apologetic about the mix-up, quite as if he had been responsible for it. Suspecting that he was embarrassed that no one had coveted my coat, I responded with forgiving geniality. As it happened, I felt a new sort of friendliness towards him; I found the memory of his disparagement endearing, not because I had mastered my resentment but because I felt none. Inadvertently, he had proved to me that I was invulnerable to a kind of affront which might seriously have wounded a different sort of man. Throughout my life, in one way and another, I have noticed that I dreaded pain less than most people. Perhaps I

have been spared it in its most savage forms; perhaps I feel it less keenly than others. The same may be true of pleasure.

Henry was saying that he thought it very decent of me to return so handsome a garment as the one he was hanging in the cupboard, against the day when Herr Jurgens (who owned factories near Mar del Plata) should return to claim it. He had almost certainly been driven away in his chauffeured car and had not noticed his loss. Was Capel even vaguely anxious that I might know what he and Vincent thought of me? He certainly favoured me with tenacious friendliness as we stood in the lobby of the Embassy. He was even courteous enough to ask what I thought of the international situation and whether another war was likely (confirmation that he had no faith in my capacity for small talk). Since it was a particularly sour period in East-West relations, I observed that it was always dangerous to be much stronger than one's rivals. Perhaps in order to disprove his humourless view of me, I advised him to make sure he had plenty of tins in his larder; if there was a war, it might well last a full week. He replied, without a smile, that he knew exactly where he was headed if he had to join the army again. 'I'm just waiting for the opportunity to go back to Rangoon — as a wireless operator, but I'm going to make sure I have a really decent set next time.'

As I buttoned myself into my own tight coat, I said, 'You can't beat the Japanese, can you?'