

MISSION LONDON

by Alek Popov

translated from the Bulgarian by Charles de Lupe

For the occasion of the opening of the European Conference, a large chunk of the cabinet poured into London, headed by the prime minister himself. The local press was exceedingly sceptical concerning the gathering in question, there was even a note of cynicism, but for the transition tormented governments from Eastern Europe, it was manna from heaven, an overwhelming prelude to their eventual membership of the club of well-off Western cousins.

Throughout those three days filled with general commotion and long speeches, with exultation and not very well hidden disappointment with the vagueness of the conference's goals, Varadin struggled merely to survive. The reality of the situation blurred before his eyes, like the countryside outside the window of a speeding train; he saw clearly only the obstacles, hazards and pit-falls that he had to avoid. The immediate proximity of the premier horrified him; that strict and powerful politician, who had swum out of the primordial soup of Post-Communism, looked to be the sort of man who breakfasted every morning on fragile clerical destinies, with garlic and horseradish sauce.

Varadin had cause to believe - he had half-heard from somewhere - that this man was less than exultant regarding his nomination to his post, and was quaking lest something happen that might confirm his suspicions. On the other hand, like all true careerists, he felt a pathological attraction to people in positions of power, and threw himself ferociously towards them, taking on all the risks that came with such dangerous proximity. For the moment, however, he had to be careful not to be dazzled by the premier's aura, which would, without doubt, attract the hatred of the other two ministers, and they could easily harm him. He also strained to keep an eye on his staff, who circled like hyenas around the powers of the day, and were only waiting for the right moment to drop him in it. The task was by no means an easy one.

The conference was being held in Lancaster House - the most portentous element of St James' Palace. The place was breathtaking in its lavish splendour, and in no way contributed to the spiritual comfort of the Eastern European government representatives. Beneath the heavy gilded ceilings from some unspecified royal residency, hovered feelings of victory and defeat. Victory, which all were party to; defeat, which no one, at least visibly, was suffering from. But if the victory was for all, then why were all the fruits of it gathered on one side, leaving only the

stalks on the other? This was what the leaders of the new democracies strove to understand and they internally complained about the new division of the old continent. Even amongst themselves, however, there remained too little brotherly love. The simple and obvious fact that they were so similar that they could see themselves in each other, infuriated them. Their own coarse reflection annoyed them and they preferred to see themselves in their rich Western relatives with aristocratic habits and noble manners.

They were envious and suspicious of one another, inclined to take the advancement of their neighbour as their own personal failure and the other way around. They scrambled desperately to get out of the general pile, without looking where they trod. The big competition for Europe had begun. The favoured countries celebrated the fact that they had come out a whisker ahead of their former allies, but their joy was overshadowed by the knowledge that between themselves and the developed European countries there lay many miles yet. The remainder, into which group fell Varadin's fatherland, were happy that they had so much as made it into the competition at all. They did not put much effort into drawing level with the West, because an old adage, from some unknown Balkan sage, abode in their subconscious: "Even sprinting, we aren't going to catch them." Their pride thrived on the fact that there were even worse cases, such as Moldova or Yugoslavia, who had not so much as found a seat at the negotiating table.

The Western diplomats looked with reluctance at this not-so-clear cocktail of vodka, palinka and rakiya, which they were being forced to swallow. At the end of the day, what they would like to do was to throw it under the table, without anyone noticing. But they could not, everyone's gaze was fixed on them, and any false move might bring with it unforeseen repercussions. It was unavoidable!

For Varadin, the conference was an excuse to make official contacts at every possible level: from foreign ambassadors and high-level employees of the Foreign Office, to foreign ministers and heads of state. He did not allow himself to be carried away by the fact that he performed all that communication with ease. He stayed alert, trying to analyse the possibilities that each new contact opened for him. But he always remained disappointed with the low horizon and narrow perspective of their potential development. The whole desperate infertility of those ephemeral introductions now seemed as obvious to him as the spark of an empty lighter. They lacked the depth and the resources to be worthwhile contacts. Their names slipped out of his

mind and their visiting cards into his pocket simultaneously. Conversing with these people required no more than three hundred words, and for the first time in his career, he came to realise that a well trained imbecile could quite easily fulfil his function! And that perhaps he was himself exactly that imbecile.

He lifted a worry filled gaze towards the prime minister. What if he had heard his thoughts? People with power usually possessed a well developed intuition regarding their inferiors. For the time being, though, the entire attention of the premier was focused on the chairman of the European Commission's speech. The little headset with the simultaneous translation was buzzing persistently in his ear, but did he hear a word of what was said? It was impossible to tell. For the last few years Varadin had been observing the people at the head of the government closely, and had caught on to the processes they underwent internally, almost without exception. The power sucked them from the inside like shrimps: their faces tightened onto their skulls, their eyes became round and bulged, ready to jump out of their sockets like bullets. Their senses also changed: the old ones atrophied, and in their place new ones developed, akin to those of lizards or insects. First they lost their ability to listen, as though they no longer grasped the meaning of words, and then they stopped seeing. They looked through people as though they were made of glass. They trusted only in the vibrations they gave off in all directions so as to gain information about the world around them from the reflections of the same.

The vibrations of power were universal and had no need of an interpreter; they warily scanned every body they met. They examined them for form and consistency, they checked their durability and colour, they searched for irregularities and cracks, and they gauged the strength of their vibrations, if they had any. Then they reported back. The bodies were either animate or inanimate. The animate ones were divided into subdued and non-subdued. The non-subdued were subdivided into hostile and neutral. The hostile were subdivided into strong and weak. One had to be careful with the strong ones!

The chairman of the European Commission was strong, although he looked soft and well-polished. He was smooth and had no cracks; his vibrations were low and unobtrusive, yet powerful. Not so much strength of character as the strength of the institution he represented. He was not to be underestimated and the prime minister was alert: cold and immobile, his head raised - the wire of his headset hung lifeless from his ear - only the slow movement of his Adam's apple gave him away. Up and down. On his other side sat the foreign minister, who was

constantly taking notes in a gilt-edged, leather bound, luxury notebook. He also had a headset, although his was crammed into his ear, not that he needed translation, but to show solidarity with his superior. Varadin threw a glance at his own notebook and realised with horror that the only thing he had jotted down was a little stickman in the bottom corner. He was straining to catch up on what he had missed, when the chairman's speech, somewhat unexpectedly, ended. There was polite applause until some other leader took the podium. At that exact moment, the premier inclined his head towards Varadin and whispered: "Is my speech ready?"

The ambassador nodded instinctively. In reality, he was not so sure. The question concerned, of course, the English translation of the speech, which would be distributed to the listeners. The creation in question had been tirelessly edited, until the very last minute, and only this morning had the staff at the embassy started its feverish translation. He quietly got to his feet, and went to talk to one of the diplomats that had accompanied the delegation.

Councillor Danailov was chatting carelessly with the mighty Minister for Industry and some other upper echelon clerks of the Cabinet entourage. The sight of this turned the ambassador's stomach. He drew him to one side and asked him whether the premier's speech was ready. Danailov calmly looked at his watch and said: "It should be here already. I'll go and get it." Varadin, relieved, watched his figure until it left the Negotiation Hall, then immediately returned to the group. Danailov left Lancaster House at the pace of a well fed man; he crossed the courtyard full of shiny limousines, and went to the gate. The intern Nikola Turkeiev was already waiting for him there, looking around impatiently. He did not have a pass for the conference, his job was merely to bring the translated and printed speech from the embassy to the gate.

"How are you, lad?" Danailov gave him a friendly thump on the shoulder.

"Did you get it?" asked the intern. He looked worried and confused.

"What should I have got?"

"Well, the speech"

"Weren't you bringing it?" asked the councillor in surprise.

"I gave it to someone to give to you, just a minute ago," the intern said and hurried to explain himself. "I was worried it might be late."

"Wait here, I'll go check." The councillor's voice was suddenly grim.

He came back a short while later, even more grim.

"Can't find it anywhere." He scratched behind his ear. "Why the hell didn't you wait for me, clever clogs?"

"I waited," the intern quavered. "You didn't turn up and I got worried. I asked some guy to call someone out, but he offered to take it to you himself."

"What did he look like?" asked Danailov suspiciously.

"Well, I mean..." stuttered the young Turkeiev. "He had a raincoat and glasses, he was extremely polite."

"And you gave him the premier's speech?" The councillor's eyebrows raised. "Every copy?" The intern nodded, devastated.

Danailov quickly questioned security. The cops confirmed that Turkeiev had given the copies to a tall gentleman in a green raincoat. The man had been coming to the gate every hour and people had been bringing him documents that he had taken inside. Maybe he was from the Romanian Embassy, no one was sure. There was always a crowd around the entrance. Danailov left the intern to stew in his own juices and quickly headed into the building, checking at every step for green raincoats. Varadin lay in wait for him, hidden behind a column in the foyer.

"Where is the speech?" he asked, white as a sheet.

"What? Haven't they brought it yet?" asked Danailov surprised, though not very convincingly.

"No! No! No!" repeated the ambassador staccato.

"That Turkeiev gave it to some Romanian," said the Councillor. "He promised to bring it to us."

"Filthy idiot!!!" Varadin punched the column with his fist.

"Well, they still might bring it," suggested Danailov.

"You wish! What if they don't?"

The councillor stayed sensibly silent. In the ambassador's eyes blazed powerless hatred. "We've got to find that man!" He cast about in panic. "The premier is on in 10 minutes. They're going to crucify us."

"They're going to crucify you," said the experienced Danailov to himself, but tried to look as though he cared. He described as best he could the supposed Romanian and they ran in opposite directions to find him.

The numbers flew through Varadin's mind like the balls in a lottery machine. The green raincoat had either been buried or put in a closet because nobody was wearing outdoor clothing. "Fuck! Fuck!" he added as he ran around in a trance. "I knew something like this would happen! I knew it! Those fuckwits!" The portraits of the old British politicians looked down on him with veiled contempt. Suddenly he stopped as though nailed to the spot, as a sinister suspicion dawned on him. Were they lying about this mythical Romanian? Was that not actually some Bulgarian? That fox Danailov! Or the secretive Turkeiev, who always plays the idiot! Or perhaps the pair of them - a criminal duo who planned to bring him down? He returned to the hall: he was almost certain that the councillor had already attached himself to the delegation and was explaining the situation to them, putting him in the worst possible light. But there was no one there. Varadin sighed briefly, then his panic started riding him again: the premier had stopped listening to the other leaders and was carefully reviewing his notes. He was preparing to take the floor.

Varadin strove to find the Romanians. Their delegation was situated at the other end of the hall. He left the hall, made the circuit and reentered. He bumped into a group of diplomats who nodded to him politely but coldly. No one was wearing a raincoat. Simultaneously, Danailov made an appearance. He quickly scanned those present, then his gaze slid to the piles of documents scattered across the tables. Their eyes met. Danailov shrugged.

"Ask them!" hissed the ambassador.

"They'll laugh at us," the councillor whispered. He was right dammit! They separated again and continued the search. Varadin began to look in all sorts of crazy places: behind curtains, vases, armchairs, even in the rubbish bins. He gave the impression of an agent looking for a time-bomb in the last minute before detonation. Security followed his actions with increasing worry, until a young man with an unobtrusive headset approached him decisively.

"Can I help you, sir?" he asked unceremoniously. Varadin stared wildly at his well-shaven, pink face. Could he actually help him? At just that moment the prime minister's name flew from the hall with a sound like the awful beat of the gong announcing the second coming. His body wavered. The agent lightly took his arm.

"Your excellence!" he exclaimed, frightened: he had obviously already managed to read his ID badge. Varadin heroically maintained his equilibrium, and uttered what was appropriate in such complicated situations: "99".

"I beg your pardon, sir?" the agent raised his eyebrows.

"Ninety-nine."

"Ah!" he smiled, happy that he had understood the meaning of the foreign words purely from the other's expression. "The toilet! This way, please." And he pointed to the end of the corridor. Varadin headed mechanically in the direction indicated. The agent shook his head and slowly pronounced: "De-ve-de-se-di-de-vit." Foreign languages were amazing.

What was this strange and beautiful place? Varadin asked himself curiously. How had he got there? The narrow cubicle gave him a feeling of security. The walls, the tiles, the ceiling shone with cleanliness. It was warm and smelled lovely. The water murmured gently beneath the lid. "I'm in the closet!" the thought occurred to him. Just a second before he had said the blessed number "one". He was calm now. Suddenly, his eye was caught by a stack of paper balanced on top of the cistern. It didn't look like toilet paper. He read the title. Adrenalin whipped his brain once more. The premier's speech! The fucking translation of the fucking speech in all fifty fucking copies here in the closet!

The door of the cubicle opened wide and the frame was eclipsed by the impressive silhouette of an elderly lady. She had carefully styled hair and a beautiful, cruel face. She frowned and tightened her lips like a matron in a Victorian girl's school.

"You naughty boy!" she wagged her finger at him and slammed the door.

"Wasn't that Lady Thatcher?" he asked himself, his jaw on his knees.

With a few skilful jumps Varadin reached the corridor, hugging the priceless sheets to his chest, and stared at the little shoe on the toilet door in embarrassment, it was a female shoe. He rushed to the hall. At the entrance he ran into Danailov.

"So you found them!" he exclaimed and helpfully took the entire stack.

"I found them!! Varadin snapped.

"Just in time!"

"What?!" Varadin shook himself. "Hasn't he started speaking yet? I thought I heard them announce his name."

"They announced that he was going to speak after the interval." Danailov said.

Those words seemed to caress the ambassador's spirit like an angel's feather. It was the most beautiful thing that had happened to him in the last two days. Even the vindictive Danailov seemed all right, for a short time of course.

"Take care of distributing the premier's speech!" he said after the moment of sudden and undeserved bliss had passed. He puffed out his chest and brushed himself off to remove the last traces of ill-humour and then rejoined the delegation with the grace of a well groomed lion.