

THE TRAVELLER

by

Duncan James

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by

DUNCAN JAMES

**Based on a Duncan James short story
“A Bridge of Letters”**

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

**Cashback
Their Own Game
Motorbike Men
Spy People**

**Junk,
and other short stories**

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1.

THE UNCLE

Dr. Choi Shin did not believe, as he was constantly told, that the Americas were scheming to invade and humiliate the homeland, or that South Korea was a servant of its American master. Neither did he believe that North Korea was a great country whose brave and brilliant leaders were the envy of the world.

But he was the first to admit that he had not so far had a hard life, especially when compared with many others in his country. He knew how hard life there could be. Indeed, it was hard beyond belief for many, so he had heard.

He knew about the prisons for political enemies of the People's Republic of North Korea.

His brother was in one.

And he knew about the hard-labour camps, with their many hundreds of thousands of inmates who had really done nothing wrong by normal, civilised standards, but who were nevertheless being made to suffer horrendously. But he also understood that this was not a normal, civilised country in which he lived. He not only realised the fact, in spite of the constant brain-washing propaganda, but was also prepared to admit it, although not in public. If he did that, he too would become one of the many faceless and desperate inmates of the gulags.

So he kept his views to himself, knowing all the time that he was not alone either in his beliefs or in his fear of sharing them.

He knew the truth of the old saying that for evil to exist, good men must do nothing.

He did nothing.

Instead, he worked hard and prostrated himself at the feet of his Glorious Leader, Kim Jung-un as he was expected to do.

Which was how, in such a despotic country, he did well. He had worked hard, stuck to the rules, and kept his views to himself.

He now found himself in a position of comparative privilege, with a small apartment provided by the State, and enough income to allow him access to a few essentials which were not provided for him, and even some spare for the odd luxury now and then.

But he was not free. He had no official access to any news media apart from that provided by the State, which only contained propaganda dressed up as news about the State itself and its leader. It was a punishable offence to even try to access any foreign news, or entertainment for that matter. He was certainly not free to express his own views. The State machinery insisted that he should not have any views of his own, and he did not have any right to express anything other than the official version of events. He was not free to speak.

So he said nothing, as well as doing nothing against the State.

In spite of all, though, he had managed to learn enough to understand that there was a world outside his own, and that it was very different. And, he almost dared to believe, better.

Although he was not yet one of them, there were people in the country who had travelled, or who had met foreign visitors. So word spread about how other people lived, and the conditions in which they lived. The more he learnt, the more Shin wanted to learn. He wanted to travel to find out for himself.

Through his diligence and allegiance to the leadership, he had managed to improve his position in society. He had done well at school, progressed to University, successfully completed his studies, and was now employed on important scientific work.

He was one of the country's top nuclear physicist.

Mixing as he now did with some of the elite of the world's most secretive nation, he was still denied the basic freedoms of speech and movement. Even those who he regarded as

friends could never be totally trusted. The Government spied on its own people, and informers were infiltrated into every aspect of society. In some cases, one could not even trust one's own family. Anyone could be bribed or blackmailed into spying and informing, to curry favour from the leadership even at local level.

It was partly for that reason that, unlike his brother, he had never married. He rarely saw his brother anymore, in any case, since he had been unwise enough not to cheer sufficiently loudly when a member of the local hierarchy visited, and had thus been condemned to seventeen years of corrective training, with his wife, in one of the many prisons near the capital.

Dr. Choi Shin had been able, because of his position, to persuade the authorities to let him look after his nephew, who would otherwise have been forced to join them during his parents' incarceration. Choi and his nephew had always got on well together, and he both trusted and liked the boy.

By then, his nephew, Choi Yong, was just beginning his studies at university. Yong had decided to follow his uncle's example, and study nuclear physics and computer science. But even at that age, Yong was suspicious that all was not as it seemed in North Korea, and that there could be a better life elsewhere. He and his uncle discussed this often, when they were sure they could not be overheard.

It was about this time that Uncle Shin was selected to make a rare visit overseas. The visit was sponsored by the United Nations as part of their efforts to return North Korea to what they called 'normalisation' and eventual reunification with the South after their disastrous war. It was a rare chance to see life outside the stifling confines of his own country, and he felt privileged and honoured to have been selected.

Shin was to be accompanied by two other scientists and a government official who would be responsible for all the arrangements. He would be with them at all times. He was their minder.

They were to visit America, North Korea's sworn enemy, to inspect some of the US nuclear research facilities, like those at the Lawrence Livermore University. It was hoped they would collect information which would be of value to Pyongyang's own efforts. At the moment, they had to rely heavily on China for support, as they did in most areas of life.

On his return, Shin discussed his visit excitedly with Yong, an eager listener. What they had seen had been of great interest, although Shin was quite sure they had been briefed only at the lowest security level and had been shown nothing in anyway regarded as secret. But they had nevertheless learnt a great deal, and had also been gratified to know that much of their own research efforts were being mirrored in the States. Their minder was equally convinced that America was trying to catch up with the superior world-leading work being carried out in their own country, and had been at pains to ensure that nothing was passed on by the scientists in his delegation that could have been of any value to their American hosts.

Dr. Choi Shin had been as interested in exploring the American lifestyle as in their nuclear research. What little he had seen had convinced him that life was better there than at home, although the government official who was escorting them had forbidden them to watch television in their hotel room, or to buy newspapers, magazines, or videos – nothing, indeed, which could possibly corrupt them in any way. In the end, none of that was necessary anyway. They were all intelligent enough to use their eyes and draw their own conclusions about the American way of life.

"The American people enjoy amazing freedom," he explained to Yong on his return. "They are free to say and do what they like within the law, and the laws are not that strict or the punishments that severe compared with this country. They can travel freely, there is a vast amount of information available to them, through newspapers, magazines, seemingly hundreds of radio and TV channels, and they have unrestricted access to the internet. There is

a bewildering choice in everything they want, from food and drink, cars, houses – everything.”

“I always suspected that things were better outside this country,” said Yong, “and now you have seen it for yourself.”

“But I would not want to live there,” replied his Uncle, shaking his head. “Interesting though it was, I confess that I did not much enjoy my visit.”

“Why ever not?”

“I did not much like the people,” came the reply. “Those we met were very courteous and helpful and made us feel welcome, but others seemed noisy and brash and arrogant. I am sure not all of them are like that, but we met enough to give me that impression. And I found their life style totally confusing. Here, everything is planned for us; there, they have to make their own choices. In many ways, I tend to agree with some of the party propaganda we hear about the Americans.”

“You are comparing them with us, where we have no freedoms at all. I suppose you should expect them to be very different.”

“I suppose so,” his Uncle nodded. “But if ever you get the chance you must get away from here and see for yourself, to make up your own mind about where you would rather be.”

“I should certainly like to travel abroad, even to the South.”

“Life there is heavily influenced by the Americans,” said Uncle Shin.

“As life here is influenced by the Chinese,” responded Yong.

“True enough.”

“But what about the technical side of your visit – the real reason you went?”

“That was very interesting in many ways, although I suspect that we were shown very little of real importance. However, we already know enough to be able to guess at some of the gaps, and I shall certainly write a very detailed report. I must start that soon, or there will be trouble,” he grinned.

“As a matter of interest,” he added, “they seemed keen to know if I would perhaps be prepared to stay in America or go back there to help them, especially in respect of my specialist field of uranium enrichment. Somehow, they had got to know that I was involved in efforts to improve the present method of using centrifuges.”

“And you weren’t tempted?” asked Yong.

“Of course I was,” he replied. “But apart from a freer lifestyle, the Americans had nothing to offer. And in any case, to defect would not only have been difficult, but would also have put you and the rest of our family at grave risk.”

Shin frowned and thought hard for a few moments.

“I think what is really necessary is for the West to know about the dangerous work I am involved in, so that they may perhaps be able to prevent the nuclear war which frankly I see as inevitable.”

“How would that help, if they knew what you were doing?”

“If they knew the details of what I am doing, they would be able to develop a means of countering it.”

He sighed.

“But there is no easy way of getting the research information to them. I am certainly not prepared to live in America to achieve that, and in any case I wouldn’t trust them enough to use the information for the common good. More than likely, they would simply bomb our research facilities, and that would be the end of everything. But enough of this wishful thinking!” he said, “I must now get on with my report!”

Dr. Choi Shin took considerable care over the drafting of his report, which was eventually agreed by his fellow scientist and, of course, the civil servant who had been with them every step of the way.

Shin made sure that it was a long report, even if short on detail. He also made sure that it showed, beyond doubt, that the American nuclear research and development programme was specifically designed to produce weapons of mass destruction to attack North Korea and their other enemies, whereas the programme being followed under the benign leadership of his own beloved country was purely for civilian and defensive purposes to protect its citizens against evil countries in the West like America. He also managed to show that much of the work being carried out in the United States was flawed to the point of being dangerous to its own workers and nearby citizens, and that their reckless pursuit of their criminal aims was in stark contrast to the care and diligence being exercised within his own development programme. The report concluded with a short diatribe highlighting the appalling life style of the American people, and how it contrasted with the happy and contented existence enjoyed by the people of North Korea under the brilliant leadership of Kim Jong-un.

So Choi Shin had not only done nothing about the evil which he knew existed in his country, and said nothing because he was not free to speak, but he had now lied as well, all to save his own skin and preserve his position within the dictatorship. But he knew he had lied, and now knew the truth.

Life was better outside.

His report was, of course, warmly welcomed by the authorities as he had intended it should be and was widely quoted in the State media as proof, if any were needed, that North Korea was a shining example to the rest of the world.

He explained all this to his nephew, Yong, who understood, and became even more determined to get away from his homeland if ever the opportunity presented itself. Shin himself also longed for a different life with more freedom, but knew it was out of the question. He could not defect, and if he did make the attempt, where would he go? Certainly not to America, in spite of its many attractions.

But he was not to know that another overseas visit for him was being arranged.

In his report, Shin had given details of the research being carried out at the Lawrence Livermore laboratory into nuclear fusion. Of course, it was known that this potential new form of energy was being studied. Although no work was being carried out in North Korea, it had been reported that China was investigating the possibility of using nuclear fusion as a source of unlimited power.

The need for this in North Korea was perhaps greater than anywhere. There was a chronic shortage of power throughout the country, and even in the Pyongyang, electricity was switched off completely at nine o'clock every night. In most parts of the country, where there was any electricity supply at all, it was only available for two hours in the morning and two in the evening, and even then there were frequent power failures.

The scientists he met in America had been more forthcoming about their fusion research, since it was in no way connected with nuclear weapons, so Shin's report was also more detailed. In spite of their openness, however, it had seemed to him that the Americans were behind the game. It had often been mentioned to him that a good deal of excellent research was being carried out in this field in England, and that in many respects they had made better progress than in America. Indeed, he heard that a prominent British scientist in this field had been the target of a Russian assassination attempt to prevent further progress being made in a field which threatened the power that Russia could wield through its vast reserves of natural oil and gas. Although the scientist had recently died in Switzerland (*read 'Spy People'*), the team he had left behind was continuing his pioneering and world leading research. On an almost daily basis, he learnt, they were able to use nuclear fusion to generate electricity. What so far eluded them was the ability to sustain such generation in a controllable fashion. It was no use if you could not switch it on and off at will.

Dr. Choi Shin was a research scientist who dealt with nuclear fission, not nuclear fusion. But he was held in high regard, and his report was enough for him to be selected to visit the United Kingdom to learn more about their work.

It was an exciting prospect, but as always with these things, it took ages to arrange. Eventually, the United Nations, the British Council, the UK Government, the North Korean Foreign Ministry, the Politburo and the many other agencies involved in these things approved his visit and issued the necessary visas, currency and tickets. As with his visit to America, he had a fellow scientist as company and a Government civil servant, Moon Pak, who would arrange everything – their ‘minder’ in other words.

But his visit to England was altogether different, and proved to be a turning point in both his life, and in that of his nephew Yong, although neither of them realised it at the time.

Dr. Choi Shin was immediately made to feel welcome and at home.

He and his colleagues were met at London’s Heathrow Airport at the foot of the aircraft steps, and escorted through the customs and immigration checks by an official from the Foreign Office, called Lee Cooper.

“I know you have been to America,” Cooper explained Shin, “and I know how difficult these procedures can be, especially coming from a country such as yours. So I hope I can make things a little easier for you after your long flight.”

Shin soon got the impression that he was being singled out for special treatment, perhaps because he had travelled abroad before and his colleagues had not. But how did they know he had been to America?

The official from the North Korean Embassy who had also gone to meet them was still waiting in the baggage reclaim area when the party left the terminal. After their papers and baggage had been quickly checked, they were escorted to a waiting car, which took them to Oxford. They were to stay there, explained Cooper in the car, as it was close to the Culham Laboratory where the nuclear fusion research was being carried out.

“I have booked rooms for you all in The Old Bank Hotel in the High Street. You each have your own room with en-suite shower and so on, and I am sure you will be very comfortable.”

“We do not wish to have separate rooms,” protested their minder, who could immediately see that he would lose control of his party. “We would rather share, and be together.”

“I am afraid that is not possible,” said Cooper. “This is a very good Hotel, and you need have no fear about the bill. It will be Her Majesty’s Government’s pleasure to meet all your expenses.”

“What about security, then?” blustered Moon Pak, the Korean official.

“Each room has its own safe, and larger items can be left safely and securely with the reception desk.”

Cooper had almost been expecting this.

“What else is in these rooms?” demanded the official.

“You will find everything you need, including a small bar with wines and spirits, and of course a radio and television.”

Cooper knew this would be the last straw.

The Korean minder turned to his colleagues. “You will not drink or watch television,” he commanded, and immediately wished he hadn’t.

Cooper added salt to the wound, tongue in cheek.

“Of course, you may have the newspaper of your choice delivered to your room first thing every morning during your stay, so that you can keep up with world events.”

“No newspapers and no TV,” commanded Moon.

“I have chosen this Hotel specially as it is centrally placed in Oxford, and it will be easy for you to explore this historic University City,” said Cooper. “You are, of course, free to do whatever you like, and go anywhere you wish.”

“We will stay together in the Hotel,” decided the Korean.

“I know you all speak English,” said Cooper, “but if you would find it helpful, I could join you for dinner later when you have rested and perhaps explored a little. I could then help you with the menu in the excellent Quod restaurant, or we could visit a different bar or café if you wish. There are some excellent eating places in Oxford, including some first-class Chinese restaurants if that would make you feel more at home. Shall I meet you in the bar at, say, seven o’clock?”

Choi Shin spoke up before their civil service colleague could say anything. Although they had not previously met Moon Pak, the two scientists recognised him as a decent man, but with a job to do, which he was determined to do to the best of his ability.

“All this is most kind of you, Mr. Cooper. I am sure we shall be most comfortable, and that we shall enjoy exploring Oxford. Seven o’clock would be ideal – thank you.”

“Good! I can then outline the arrangements for the rest of your stay, and what we have in mind for your visit to Culham tomorrow. If I can arrange it, I will even invite one of our scientists from there to join us for dinner this evening.”

“That would be an excellent idea,” said Shin. “And I have a special favour to ask you while I am here.”

“What is that?” asked Cooper. “I’m sure we will be only too pleased to help if we can.”

“We are here, as you know,” said Shin, “to be briefed on your efforts to harness nuclear fusion as an unlimited source of carbon-free energy, and we know that you are leading in this field of research.”

Cooper nodded.

“As you may know, my own special field of research is to do with nuclear fission and in particular the enrichment of uranium. I wondered if it would be at all possible to visit your own research facilities in this area while I am here. At Aldermaston, I believe?”

Cooper thought for a moment.

“In fact, our main nuclear research facilities are run by the UK Atomic Energy Authority at Harwell, not far from here. Aldermaston is our Atomic Weapons Establishment.”

“Regrettably, nuclear weapons are my field, not general research, so a visit to Aldermaston would be a wonderful opportunity for me to compare notes, shall we say, with others in the same field.”

The Korean official, Moon Pak, who was acting as their guide and minder immediately saw the wisdom of this request. What a coup for his country if such a briefing could be given! Add this to the briefings they had received in America, and their beloved leader would immediately become one of the best informed of all world leaders, as he already was in so many other fields. He would make sure on his return that his lords and masters knew what a brilliant man Dr. Choi Shin was to have suggested such a thing. It crossed Pak’s mind that he might even try to claim credit for the idea himself on their return.

Cooper thought for a moment, as the car drew up to the hotel entrance.

“I am sure that such a visit could be arranged, although it is short notice. However, my scientist colleague who I shall invite to join us later will be well placed to arrange such a briefing if that is possible. I shall ring him immediately, and look forward to seeing you all again this evening.”

“Thank you Mr. Cooper,” said Shin.

“My pleasure,” replied Cooper with a wry smile.

When Lee Cooper got back to his desk in MI6, there was a note stuck to his computer screen. He slung his jacket over the back of his chair and walked to another office a short way down the corridor. He knocked on the door marked ‘James Piper. Head of Section 7’, and walked in without being asked.

“You wanted to see me, boss?” he asked as James looked up.

“I’ve had the Americans on,” announced James.

“What does Auntie want this time?”

“Dr. Choi Shin.”

“So do we.”

“They know he’s over here.”

“And we knew when he went there.”

“They want us to share any information we get from him.”

“Like they shared with us?”

“They didn’t get anything, apparently. Nothing worth sharing, anyway.”

Cooper sat down without being asked.

“What’s the deal, then.”

“They seem to think Choi is turn-able, and that we might be able to do it. They tried while he was there, but he was too afraid of the consequences back home. His brother and wife are already in one of the camps, and he doesn’t want the rest of his family to join them.”

“Who else is there?”

“A nephew, apparently, who he is looking after while his brother is inside. Sounds a bright kid – just started at their new University in Pyongyang.”

“Interesting.”

“They know Choi Shin is working with the Chinese on their nuclear programme, and want to know what the Chinese are up to.”

“So do we,” agreed Cooper. “That’s why he’s here.”

“How’s it going then?”

“Can’t say yet – they only just got here. But we left their Embassy man standing at the airport, which won’t be popular, and they’ve got the usual minder with them who could prove to be a more than usually difficult pain in the arse.”

Cooper looked at his watch.

“I’ll have to go soon. I’m meeting them for dinner in Oxford. Dr. Choi is interesting, though, and I tend to agree with our cousins – possibly turn-able. What’s interesting is that he’s already asked to visit Aldermaston, to see something of our military nuclear fission research, which is more his field than Culham. He even suggested it would be a chance for him to ‘compare notes’. Perhaps that means he is prepared to talk, at least.”

“If we are all right, and he is a candidate, can you turn him?”

“I’ll have a damned good try, but he is probably not here long enough. And that minder is going to be difficult to avoid.”

“Enjoy your dinner.”

“I’ve got to organise some help, first,” said Cooper. “I thought chums in Defence Intelligence might like to join us this evening. They know more about bombs than I do.”

THE DINNER

Lee Cooper had a lot to do before dinner that evening.

For a start, he had to organise, in double quick time, colleagues who could join him. He knew who he wanted to be there, and he also knew that they weren't so much going to be invited as going to be told to be there. James Piper would see to that.

Professor John Williams was no real problem. He was Director of the Nuclear Research Laboratory at Culham, which the party of overseas visitors was scheduled to visit, so in many ways he was the host. He lived not far from the laboratory, and was therefore not far from Oxford either.

But Cooper wanted someone in authority from the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston. Choi Shin had specially asked to be allowed to visit the place, and Cooper was keen that he should, if only to meet people.

The right people. People who would be able to ask Choi the right questions, and perhaps entice him to stay. He had information everyone wanted, and had already talked about 'comparing notes'. The sooner he was given the chance to do that, the better.

The problem with Aldermaston was that AWE was a civilian organisation, run by a consortium of technical specialist companies on behalf of the Government. Paul Sheppard was one of the senior technical directors and was working there on secondment from the Ministry of Defence. Still one of us, so to speak.

That's who Cooper wanted at the dinner table.

He didn't live near Oxford, but near Reading and the AWE complex. But he knew about Choi Shin from the Americans and our own UK Intelligence sources, so he took no persuading to meet him. A son's birthday party suddenly went up in smoke.

Having fixed his dinner party hosts, Cooper thought for a minute.

There would be three of them, and three of 'us'. But an extra pair of eyes and ears would be useful, he concluded. Our team could sit one either side of Choi, isolating him from his colleagues, which was essential, but it would be useful to have someone sitting directly across from Choi. Perhaps someone from Defence Int. could do it. That would leave him to look after the 'minder' and the other scientist.

James Piper suggested Martin Davis, a weapons expert with experience of the Far East. Cooper rang him, and although they had never met, they got on well on the phone. Davis quickly got the plot, and agreed to play the part selected for him at the dinner. He'd not been to Korea, but knew Vietnam, which was close enough Cooper thought.

Cooper had booked a private room for their meal at the Hotel, and rang Piper for one more favour.

"We need the place wired up," he said.

"I'd thought of that, and already got a bloke organised. Len Ellis is one of the best technical officers there is, and he's been trying to get in touch with you on the secure mobile."

"Where is he now?" asked Cooper.

"Already of his way to the Old Bank Hotel."

"He'll do. I'll meet him there."

Ellis got there first, and was already at work with a couple of other technical colleagues in the private dining room when Cooper arrived. Another of Ellis's team was outside, keeping the hotel staff away, although they had already laid the table and done whatever else it is that hotel staff do at these times.

"The most important bloke will be sitting here," Cooper pointed.

“I’ll give him two bugs all to himself then!”

“Where will you be?”

“There’s a camper van in the car park. I’ll be there with a couple of chums making sure we don’t miss anything. I’ll have separate feeds into the van from each person, but you’ll have to identify them afterwards. I’m assuming you don’t want video as well – there’s hardly time to fix that.”

“Audio will be enough, thanks. How does that work?”

“Micro-chip wireless transceivers. Short range, but enough to get to the van.”

“Where are you putting them?”

“Mind your own business! No-one will find them; guaranteed.”

“Hope you’re right. Shit will hit fan if you’re wrong.”

“Relax. I’ve done this before.”

“You’ve been recommended.”

Ellis knew his stuff, all right. No doubt about that

“Drop in to the van when it’s all over, and have a quick listen to what we’ve got,” invited Ellis.

“I’ll bring a doggy bag.”

After the introductions and a welcome glass of Champagne before dinner, the party relaxed. Most of them, anyway. Mr. Moon Pak didn’t look as if he’d ever relaxed in his life, although that didn’t stop him having a second glass of pre-dinner Champers.

But he was plainly on edge, knowing that it would be impossible for him to monitor, let alone influence, what was said to or by his two scientist colleagues. He could only hope that they stuck to the rules. Not that they had so far. He knew that Dr Shin had already been out of the Hotel for a walk around the city centre, exposing himself to the appalling life style enjoyed by the West, and leaving himself open to be influenced by the decadence to be found in the capitalist life style of alcohol and drugs enjoyed by the youth who purported to be students in this University city.

He knew, though, that Choi Shin was a strong character, well able to resist any temptations which he might come across. As a scientist, the Doctor had an enquiring mind, and no doubt his brief excursion was in the interests of research more than anything else.

Pak could not have been more wrong.

Choi Shin’s ‘brief excursion’ had only one object – to help him decide if this life-style was better than that in North Korea, and if so whether it was worth the enormous risk involved if he should decide to defect and stay there.

He had already concluded that it was certainly better than he had witnessed in America, and that both were better than his own. He longed for the freedom enjoyed here. Living in this country, he would have access to everything he could wish for, but which was denied him at home, where he and his fellow citizens were weighed down by restrictions, suppressed by an overbearing state machine and denied the very basic of human rights. Here, he would be able to openly discuss his work with others and have access to every imaginable research tool he could wish for, not only radio and television which was independent of Government influence, but a free press producing literature and news - and comment - about every aspect of life here and abroad. He was able, as he had demonstrated quietly in his hotel room, to access the internet with its endless array of research opportunities. He had been able this afternoon to browse through scientific journals openly on display in newsagents. He had visited the Bodleian Library, with its world famous collection of books, manuscripts, learned papers, any of which he would have been able to study if he had wished in one of the many reading rooms.

And the people – freely able to meet together, to talk, to discuss, to argue, to eat and drink, to come and go as they wished. Dr Choi had been out of his hotel for only an hour or so – he lost track of time – and had not seen a single policeman or official in uniform. Yet his own country, in which he was a prominent citizen, had chosen to send with him and his colleague their own ‘policeman’, the civil servant minder Moon Pak. The British, though, were sufficiently trusting to let him come and go freely as he wished. They had not dictated what he did or where he went, and had not imposed any restrictions on him or followed him wherever he went.

He had not noticed the two men on a motorbike.

But the dinner had gone well.

Even the hotel staff thought so. They were used to visiting dignitaries from abroad, but they were usually entertained by University staff. This seemed to be a smaller party than usual, and was certainly not sponsored by one of the university colleges. It was a small reception, hosted by the Government, with people up from London, entertaining people from the Far East, it looked. Some said they were from Korea, but how can you tell? They all look the same. They enjoyed their food, were polite to the staff, and everything went well. One of the Government chaps said so afterwards and thanked them, as well as thanking the Manager, which was nice.

It was a late night, though, for the hosts. After coffee in the lounge, the two scientists and their civil servant colleague, Moon Pak, went to their rooms, while the others held a quick de-brief.

John Williams started the ball rolling.

“That man Dr. Shin is a worried scientist if ever I saw one,” he pronounced.

“In what way?” asked Cooper.

“He’s worried about what he is doing back home. Reading between the lines, he sees that his country could well be heading for some sort of nuclear disaster if their current research programme continues unchecked, and the Chinese are pushing them along at all speed. The development work he’s involved in is world-leading, so far as he can tell, but if it is successful, he has no idea how his Government will use the new weapons. He acknowledges that it is an unstable regime, which could do anything.”

“I get much the same impression,” said Paul Sheppard from Aldermaston. “He seems to understand that once they have managed to develop their revolutionary method of enriching uranium, they will be able to produce weapons far more quickly than anyone else and in greater numbers.”

“He sounded frustrated that he could do nothing about it, either. He sees no way of stopping the programme, short of military action by the West, which he considers out of the question.”

“I hope he’s right,” said Cooper. “So what can be done?”

“It seems to me,” opined Martin Davis, “that we need to know in some detail what they are doing so that we can perhaps develop some form of defensive counter measure.”

“I agree,” said Sheppard. “The man plainly has information which is vital to us, but can we persuade him to give it to us?”

“He would need to defect and stay here to do that,” said Williams. “You simply cannot pass on that sort of information over a cup of tea one afternoon. We not only need to know what it is they are doing, but how they are doing it and what the Chinese role is. That means technical information, specifications, drawings and all the rest of it.”

“Which he won’t have brought with him,” said Sheppard.

“Even if he does want to co-operate, I doubt he would want to stay over here. He’s too afraid of the consequences for his family and friends back home.”

“And it’s big ‘if’, too. He hasn’t actually said in so many words that he wants to help us has he?” Cooper asked. “It’s only an impression we’ve got.”

“I wouldn’t mind listening again to what he said over dinner,” said Williams.

“That can be arranged,” said Cooper. “I didn’t tell you beforehand, but the whole evening has been carefully monitored and recorded.”

“I’ll be damned,” exclaimed Sheppard. “I should have guessed you guys would do something like that.”

“I’ll arrange for you to have transcripts tomorrow morning.

“It’s nearly that, now,” said Davis.

“Tomorrow, we’re all due to visit your establishment John. I suggest, if you can arrange it, that we get Choi to Aldermaston, on his own, the next day, prior to the final day at Culham before they leave the UK.”

“I can arrange that,” said John Williams. “And I shall be happy to show him what I can of Aldermaston, within the bounds of security,” said Sheppard. “I can quickly adapt the tour we give to first year university students.”

“Let’s all be as nice as we can to the guy, and make him feel at home,” said Cooper. “I’ll organise a full debrief as soon as they’ve gone back to Korea.”

Jang Nam, the other scientist in the party, returned to his room totally bemused. He had to admit that he had actually enjoyed his evening, although he had not in the least been expecting to.

Quite the contrary.

Before they went to the dining room, he had been talking with Moon Pak, mostly about ideology, but also agreeing about the need to be exceptionally cautious at the event which was to follow. It was absolutely essential, Moon had reminded Jang, to say as little as possible about his own work, but to learn as much as possible about the work of their hosts. That was why they were here, and it was the least their Great Leader expected. He and Choi should ask as many technical questions as they could and be wary of being drawn into any conversations which might betray their own wonderful country.

“Where was Choi, by the way?”

“Walking in the extensive hotel gardens,” replied Jang, “preparing himself to meet our foes at dinner.”

That was all right then. Pak reminded his colleague that their hosts were really nothing better than spies, and that their intention would be to ply the visitors with quantities of alcohol in an effort to learn all they could about the pioneering and world leading work they were engaged in on behalf of the fatherland.

“And another thing,” Pak frowned. “Remember not to touch any food which is not served to them as well. If you do, you could well find it laced with drugs designed to loosen your tongue. I must remember to remind Choi.”

So Jang Nam had not really been looking forward to his dinner. He was unused to being surrounded by foreign spies, and his colleague Pak had successfully put him off his food.

He was, however, much looking forward to his visit to the Culham laboratory, where he would see work akin to his own, designed to harness nuclear fusion as a source of great power. It was not quite Choi Shin’s field of work, but he was generally acknowledged to be a brilliant scientist, and was bound to learn a great deal which would be of use to his country on their return. Choi’s brilliance had been demonstrated when he asked to be allowed to visit

the Atomic Weapons facilities. It looked as if he might just be allowed to make such a visit, as well. Certainly the British had not rejected his request out of hand. If Choi could bring that off, then they would all be hailed as national heroes on their return. Choi himself was leading a major research project with colleagues from China into the future development of nuclear weapons, and he was bound to learn a great deal that would be of immense value to their glorious country. Perhaps they would learn over dinner whether or not Choi's bold initiative had been successful.

Cooper, the man who had met them on arrival, was ready to greet them when they went to the small private room downstairs for dinner. Cooper quickly introduced them to the others present. They were all said to be scientists, but the foreign delegation from North Korea all new that they were British spies, sent specially to learn as much as possible from them. One of them was said to be from the Aldermaston weapons facility, and immediately fell into conversation with Choi Shin. *'Be very careful, dear friend,'* thought Nam.

A tall man introduced himself to Jang Nam as Professor John Williams, Director of the Culham laboratory where the UK's research into nuclear fusion was being conducted. *'Now I must be careful,'* thought Nam. They were to sit together at dinner.

"We are very much looking forward to seeing you at our Culham research laboratory tomorrow," said Cooper, by way of briefing. "We shall be able to show you our work, and hopefully give you a demonstration of our fusion experiment in operation. If not tomorrow, then certainly the day after. I am also pleased to say that we have been able to arrange, through the good offices of Paul Sheppard here, for Dr. Choi Shin to visit our facilities at the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston."

"I shall accompany him there," announced Moon Pak.

"I am afraid that will not be possible, Mr. Moon, for security reasons."

"But I insist," protested Moon. "It is my job to guide my colleagues during this visit."

"I really am sorry," said Sheppard, "but I have only been able to obtain a limited security clearance for Dr. Choi. I am sure you will understand that this is a top secret installation where it is difficult to arrange for visitors other than scientists known to us."

"I must protest most strongly," blustered Moon.

"And you must understand our position," countered Sheppard. "Dr Choi is welcome to make the visit, but he will do so on his own, or not at all."

"Very well then," said Moon, "but I shall protest most strongly to my Government."

"You may be better advised not to," said Choi bravely. "What will they think if you protest that I have been denied this chance because of your own stubbornness?"

Choi took Moon by the arm.

"Trust me," he said. "This is an opportunity which will not be available to any of us again. If I must go alone, then I shall go alone."

Martin Davis turned to Paul Sheppard.

"That was close," he muttered, with his back to the others. "You nearly didn't get him to yourself."

Jang Nam turned to Moon.

"You cannot be in two places at once, and I shall explain on our return, if anyone should query your behaviour, that you had no option. Our dear leader would not have wished you to deny our country this unique opportunity."

"Very well, then," said Moon again. "I am sure that we are most grateful to you for allowing one of our top scientists to visit your establishment at such short notice," he said to Sheppard. "We shall probably learn a great deal that will be of value to our country".

"It's our pleasure."

The humour was lost on him.

As they took their places for dinner, Choi and Sheppard were soon in earnest conversation, as were Williams and Nam. Moon Pak heard virtually nothing of either conversation, not least because of the non-stop chatter from Lee Cooper who was sitting next to him.

From Cooper's point of view it was all working out rather well after a shaky start. Moon Pak had given up.

Dr. Choi Shin was like a dog with two tails. A visit to Aldermaston agreed, and sitting next to one of its head scientists at dinner.

Paul Sheppard from Aldermaston was also delighted to be next to the one man they all really wanted, either as a defector or as an informer.

Jang Nam was seated next to the Director of the Culham Nuclear Research Laboratory, which he was to visit in the next two days.

Martin Davis was fast learning about the Chinese involvement in the North Korean nuclear development programme, and could see promotion looming once his Ministry of Defence superiors heard what he had to tell them.

Len Ellis was busy in the car park, but looking forward to his doggy bag.

As the party left, Cooper made his way across the car park to the camper van. Ellis was waiting for him.

"I heard all that, as you would expect," he announced, "and I've already put in hand the verbatim transcripts you want. You shall have them in the morning."

"Brilliant – thanks."

"Don't mention it! And while you were enjoying yourself at Her Majesty's expense, I've run taps into their Hotel rooms as well. They're live feeds into the Ops Room at HQ."

"I should have thought of that," admitted Cooper.

"You didn't need to. James Piper asked me to fix it."

"I suppose that's why he's in charge and I'm not!"

"Probably. And I suppose you forgot my doggy bag, too."

There was no doubt about it; the dinner had gone well.

There were people who needed to know what had happened at the dinner.

James Piper, for one, was under orders to de-brief his boss, 'C', as soon as possible. He had listened to the conversations as they took place during the meal, and briefly visited the Ops Room to hear some of the after-dinner chat between the Koreans, before contacting Sir Geoffrey Sefton.

Jack Salisbury, Head of the Joint intelligence Organisation thought he should know what had happened, and looked to General Sir Pearson-Jones, Chief of Defence Intelligence, to tell him.

So Martin Davis didn't get much sleep that night, either. Salisbury was adamant that Ministers should not be briefed at this stage, so went out of his way to tell the Permanent Secretaries of both the Foreign Office and the Home Office to mind their own business for the time being. That meant that the Government's Chief Scientist was also not told what was going on.

Lower down the pecking order, though, it was different. Those people who needed to know because they needed to do something, were briefed immediately.

James Piper got on to his opposite number in charge of Section 11. It was their job to keep tabs on important people, and make sure they came to no harm. Retired Colonel Bill Clayton ran that operation, and it was his two men on a motorbike who had been keeping a

close eye on Dr. Choi Shin during his stroll round Oxford that afternoon. Actually, it was yesterday afternoon now, but they were all still 'on the case' in spite of the late hour.

Clayton reported that Choi had seemed relaxed as he strolled down the High Street. He had looked in to a couple of book shops, browsed the newspaper stand, and actually been in to the Bodleian Library, although not for long. He had returned to the news stand to buy a copy of The Times, and then sat outside Jane's' Team Rooms for a cuppa while he read it. He left the paper behind when he returned to the Old Bank Hotel. Section 11 had retrieved it, and so far as they could tell from a quick examination, he had not written in it or left any messages inside. Neither did they think that he had been followed, either – except by them, of course. They were keeping watch outside the Hotel, but agreed it was not necessary to follow him on his official visits.

And so the jig-saw was being put together, and the impression gained that Dr. Choi Shin was a probable target who might talk, even if he did not defect.

They were all encouraged.

But there was also a consensus developing that Dr. Choi could be of more value to the UK if he returned to Korea, rather than stay in this country. If a means could be established to keep in touch with the man, he would be able to keep us informed of developments, both there and in China, whereas if he defected and stayed in the UK, his information would soon become dated and of increasingly reduced value.

So it was agreed, subject to further analysis based on what was said during the rest of his visit, that if Dr. Choi did decide to co-operate with us, he should return home and keep in touch from there, rather than stay in this country. The option could always be left open for him to return here 'on asylum' at a later date.

Agreed, that is, apart from a few within the defence industry. They, after all, were in charge of our nuclear deterrent, and that meant that for it to remain viable, they needed to know what it was that it had to deter. So they were desperate to know what the Chinese were doing which might in some way prejudice the effectiveness of our Trident submarines and their missiles. The Americans, for the same reasons, were also desperate to know, but had seemingly let the man slip through their fingers during his visit to the States.

The Defence Intelligence organisation had, almost within their grasp, the one man who could brief them in detail about what was happening in China, and yet those buffoons in Whitehall were intending to send him home. It beggared belief, in their mind.

Martin Davis was firmly of the view that the man should be kept here if that was an option. He discussed his views briefly over the secure phone link with his Director, General Pearson-Jones, and agreed to meet him, also secretly, later that night, with a few others from within the armed services. Paul Sheppard, the MOD man on secondment to Aldermaston, was among them.

There was a long discussion of all the pros and cons. On the one hand, if he could be persuaded to stay in this country, Choi could be offered work, a new identity and a safe haven from his fellow countrymen. On the other hand, he would be an on-going security liability, and, as someone pointed out, could well be a 'plant', sent to infiltrate our nuclear defence organisation to pass intelligence back to North Korea and China. Whatever happened, he would need to be closely monitored.

At the end of a long night, it was agreed that he should be invited to defect and stay here in relative safety to work alongside our own nuclear physicists, providing he agreed willingly to pass on what information he had about the Chinese work in which he was involved.

In spite of all the late night deliberations and discussion, one thing remained plain. Nothing could be done without Choi's agreement.

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