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THE TIMES



LEN DEIGHTON

The grand master
of the thriller

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Len Deighton was born in 1929. He worked as a railway clerk before doing his National Service in the RAF as a photographer attached to the Special Investigation Branch.

After his discharge in 1949, he went to art school – first to the St Martin’s School of Art, and then to the Royal College of Art on a scholarship. His mother was a professional cook and he grew up with an interest in cookery – a subject he was later to make his own in an animated strip for the *Observer* and in two cookery books. He worked for a while as an illustrator in New York and as art director of an advertising agency in London.

Deciding it was time to settle down, Deighton moved to the Dordogne where he started work on his first book, *The Ipcress File*. Published in 1962, the book was an immediate success.

Since then his work has gone from strength to strength, varying from espionage novels to war, general fiction and non-fiction. The BBC made *Bomber* into a day-long radio drama in ‘real time’. Deighton’s history of World War Two, *Blood, Tears and Folly*, was published to wide acclaim – Jack Higgins called it ‘an absolute landmark’.

As Max Hastings observed, Deighton captured a time and a mood – ‘To those of us who were in our twenties in the 1960s, his books seemed the coolest, funkiest, most sophisticated things we’d ever read’ – and his books have now deservedly become classics.

FICTION

The Ipcress File
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Funeral in Berlin
Billion-Dollar Brain
An Expensive Place to Die
Only When I Larf
Bomber
Declarations of War
Close-Up
Spy Story
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Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Spy
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Goodbye Mickey Mouse
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Blood, Tears and Folly

Close-Up





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Introduction

The story of Marshall Stone is the story of an actor. His dilemma is one that still faces many actors and actresses. Public television was born with the Berlin Olympics of 1936 and after a period of hibernation caused by World War Two, it soon became an affordable utility of the Western World like hot water and electricity. But for actors and actresses television did not have the attraction offered by the theatre and films. Television became the residential home where reputations went to die and has never escaped from this grim shadow.

Close-Up is the story of a writer and an actor. Actors, and sometimes writers too, are an exasperating breed; manic-depressives with a foot pressed hard on the accelerator or hard on the brake. Sadly, the film world does not treat these delicate temperaments with care and consideration. Few of us could withstand the sort of rollercoaster ride that leads to stardom and then back to earth again. *Close-Up* explains in detail the skills and hazards that the difficult art of acting involves. As you will no doubt detect, I like actors and actresses and all the other people who spend their lives making movies. I like them all so much that I had to write this book about them and about the convoluted way in which movies are made and devious movie deals put together. Writing several scripts – including two James Bond scripts – and producing two films, one of them a musical, gave me a wonderful insight into film, from the deal-making that starts the process to the editing and post-recording that ends it. This is how my education started.

‘Maybe you suddenly hate the way he parts his hair.’ This was Harry Saltzman’s way of describing the irrational personal showbiz dislikes that are impossible to account for in any other way. Harry felt that formal written contracts were only valuable when the parties concerned forgot the promises they had made at the start of the deal. He was right and I never needed to refer back to any contract I had with him. I was very fond of Harry Saltzman, who had co-produced the James Bond films and by buying the film rights for *The Ipcress File* in 1961 started both me and Michael Caine on our respective careers. But Harry was a very private person and it was a sad fact that he never seemed to distinguish between his friends and his enemies.

I had dinner with him one evening and picked up the bill. Harry was quite alarmed. ‘I always pay the bills,’ he said. He was resigned to being exploited. He never showed resentment about the freeloaders who drifted to his lovely Mayfair mews home in the early evening with a view to joining him, his wife and anyone he was doing business with, for a lavish meal in some fine restaurant.

I owe a great deal to Harry Saltzman. Writers are not respected in the movie business. Along with directors and all the other technicians they are despised and regarded as easily replaced workers with limited skills. But that was not Harry’s way with writers; he liked them, even if he did routinely shuffle his pack of scriptwriters, so that most of his films went through several total rewrites before shooting began. The first lesson I learned from Harry is that films are created by producers: they buy the story and choose everyone else who makes it into a film. I started to think that becoming a movie producer who wrote his own material would be unceasing fun. In this assumption I was proved wrong.

Without Harry’s kindness I could never have written this book, *Close-Up*. I questioned him relentlessly about films, filming and his career. He immediately responded to my thirst for knowledge by assigning me to write a screenplay for *From Russia With Love* and including me in the half-dozen people who went to Turkey on the recce trip for the film. On a separate occasion, Harry invited me

meet him in Paris so that we could watch a remarkable James Bond sequence in which a jet-propelled backpack sent Sean Connery's stunt double up to rooftop heights. By the time my book, *The IPCRE File*, was being filmed in a wonderful old house in Grosvenor Gardens near Victoria Station in London, I was beginning to understand something of the way movie producers transform books into movies.

Harry became a mentor to me. So when I was working on the final draft of a screenplay based on Joan Littlewood's stage show, *Oh What A Lovely War!*, I went to Harry to ask his advice and seek his approval. He was occupying a tiny circular office in a turret surmounting one of Shaftesbury Avenue's famous theatres. As usual, Harry was wearing a superbly tailored suit, crisp shirt and silk tie with the bright red socks providing the only hint of eccentricity. He was his usual congenial self. He warned me that Joan Littlewood's stage production had closed many years previously and that numerous people had tried to make it into a film. 'None of them got a deal,' said Harry. 'So don't put down any of your own cash.'

It was too late. I had already paid Joan, out of my own pocket, for a six-month option on the screen rights. I was disconcerted by Harry's warning and spent a few nights worrying that I had taken too much for granted. With diminishing money to pay for all the costs that come with pre-production, and with only a bundle of carefully typed pages of film script, and some rough sketches and photos of chosen locations such as Brighton Pier, to show for months of hard work, I was nervous. But Fate often smiles upon the unwary and events took a sudden turn for the better when I was invited to have coffee with Eva Renzi, a German actress who was in London to star in Harry's film of my book, *Funeral in Berlin*. She had been having lunch at the Dorchester Hotel with her agent from the William Morris Agency. At that time the Dorchester was the world's most important gathering spot for film people. By the time we were drinking our third or fourth espresso, the William Morris Agency was representing me as a film producer.

All films need an early financial commitment and John Mather, the head of the London office of William Morris, took my script and my location photos to Paramount where Charlie Bluhdorn reigned. Fortunately for my film project, Charlie, a tycoon who had recently added Paramount to his array of business ventures, was a dedicated anglophile. I became fond of Charlie; he had an entertaining line in self-mockery and endless anecdotes about his beginnings searching through scrapyards for engine parts. I suppose my years researching books has had a lasting effect upon my social life for, despite Charlie's reputation as a fire-eater, I encouraged his reminiscences and we became friends.

It was about this time when I took a call on my car phone that was to face me with a difficult decision. The year before, in Paris, I had become friendly with Lloyd Chandler, a Canadian uranium prospector who had 'struck it rich' as they say in movies. He donated large sums to a fund organized by the celebrated philosopher Bertrand Russell, and became such a friend of Russell that he was consulted about the legal implications of a letter the great man had written to a publisher many years before. It concerned the autobiography that Russell was completing. Lloyd said his friend Lord Deighton knew all about literary contracts and publishers. In fact I know little about such things but I offer to spend some time with Bertrand Russell – widely regarded as the world's foremost intellectual – was not something to be declined.

Together with my wife, Ysabele, I went to see him. My time in Plas Penrhyn, Russell's home in Wales, was a delightful experience. 'Bertie', as he was called by those around him, was over ninety years old but he was as sharp and witty as anyone I knew and he enjoyed arguing. So it set off

relationship on a firm basis when I found his one-sided view of the Vietnam War unconvincing. And told him that without an agreed fee his letter had no legal importance. But to be on the safe side suggested that Bertie consult my old friend and adviser, Anton Felton. He confirmed my verdict on the letter and eventually assembled and collated Russell's archive and became his legal executor. It was during our time at Plas Penrhyn that Bertie told me that the Beatles had been speaking to him about making an anti-war film and that Paul McCartney wanted to talk to me about it. That, he said, was the prime reason for his invitation. A few days later, in our south London home, my wife and I cooked for Paul an elaborate Indian meal and spent the evening discussing his project. But the Beatles wanted an anti-Vietnam war film with an up to date setting. I would have enjoyed working with Paul but I could see no way to become a useful part of the Beatles project. I was deeply committed to two films by then, and Paul and the Beatles were in a hurry.

To run Paramount's European operations, Charlie Bluhdorn had appointed George 'Bud' Ornstein. Bud knew more about old Hollywood than anyone else I ever met. He was related to the legendary Mary Pickford and the stories he told about the days she ruled the movie world enthralled me and provided a basis for some of the material used in *Close-Up*. Bud was responsible for many of the finest European films of the fifties and sixties. Luckily for me, as well as being a major figure in the film world, Bud was a pilot and an aviation enthusiast. My hours with him were always a delight. It was Bud who first pointed out that, since my script for *Oh! What A Lovely War* proposed many scenes on Brighton pier and was largely dependent on outdoor locations, it would be wise to defer shooting until the following summer. It was good advice and yet by this time I had rather grand offices – one occupied by Alexander Korda – overlooking the traffic swirling around Hyde Park Corner (the site now a hotel). The continuing expenses during such a gap in the schedule were going to drain from me money I couldn't afford.

To fit into the empty time I produced another film. I assigned the screen rights of *Only When I Larf* to my recently completed book about confidence tricksters, to my production company, and had a writer friend of mine – John Salmon – write a screenplay. By chance, the story was set in New York City, London and sunny Beirut, Lebanon, and to dodge the winter weather I scheduled the production for all three locations. I engaged Basil Dearden to direct and David Hemmings to star. It was while I was casting *Only When I Larf* that Richard Attenborough called me out of the blue and asked if he could direct my film of *Oh! What a Lovely War*. I had never met him. He had obtained a copy of my screenplay from his friend, John Mills, to whom I had tentatively offered the role of the infamous General Haig. Dicky Attenborough had never directed a film but he had decided that the time had come for him to do something other than acting. I wasn't sure he was the right person for me; this was a large-scale musical with all the added complications that would bring. Dicky had spent most of his adult life acting in movies and knew a great deal about the way they were made, but directing a full colour musical with dancing and outdoor locations would be a challenge. He had also seen the script for *Only When I Larf* and suggested that he could play the elder man against the young man played by David Hemmings. This would give him a chance to spend time with me during the filming and give me a chance to make up my mind about him. William Morris, who represented me for this movie, proposed David Niven as the co-star and Basil Dearden was against using Dicky, saying he wanted someone more 'sexy'. I nevertheless cast Richard Attenborough as the elder confidence trickster. It was virtually the last role of his long and distinguished acting career.

Despite the logistics and expense of filming in Beirut and Manhattan my production of *Only When I Larf* went smoothly. It was not easy for Basil Dearden; although he had directed dozens of stud-

films he had never worked on an all-location one. He also had to put up with my choice of a very young lighting cameraman and such innovations as overhead lighting that permitted 360-degree camera pans and my insistence upon mixing daylight and artificial light without corrective colour 'gel' screens. On the whole it proved a lucky production. The only major hitch was the noise of our big mobile generator which, parked on a street in Beirut, spoiled some of the recording. This demanded the added time and expense of some post-synched dialogue but Basil was a professional and we squeezed the budget to pay for it. I followed the film through the editing and entire postproduction and decided that films could be made or crippled by these last weeks of work.

By this time, I was talking to all manner of people who wanted to be a part of the *Oh! What A Lovely War* film. I had half a dozen directors asking for the job – Basil Dearden had mentioned almost every day on the set – and I even had offers from some of the Hollywood greats, including Gene Kelly. In any other circumstances, I would have given anything to work with Gene Kelly but this film dealt with an important chapter in Britain's history and it had to have a British director. My screenplay brought many drastic changes to the stage version. The one-act-after-another 'music-hall' format of the stage show would not make a movie. There was no 'story' in it. For a film the words and songs had to be incorporated into written narrative; a story of the war that year by year reflected the nation's mounting gloom and sadness. Individuals were combined to become the Smith family, whose men volunteered gladly to serve in the war that killed them. And most important of all, I had envisaged a powerful ending; a vast expanding landscape of graves accompanied by the wonderful old Jerome Kern song 'They Didn't Believe Me'. My script met the major challenges, which is why Bud Ornstein at Paramount had supported the project.

Like most screenplay writers, I had visualized each and every shot and kept an eye on the probable costs of each location and its whereabouts. Dicky Attenborough understood that it was going to be restricting to have a producer who had written the screenplay looking over his shoulder throughout the filming but after sitting around with me on the *Only When I Larf* locations, and listening to me explain my screenplay shot by shot, he promised to keep to every word of it, and welcomed having a storyboard artist to sketch proposals for each day's camera set-ups. The daily storyboards were the work of Pat Tilley, a gifted artist who had been a close friend of mine since our days as illustrators. Bud Ornstein still had doubts about trusting such a big musical film to Dicky Attenborough, a first-time director, and no doubt eyed me in the same way, but Charlie, who was an instinctive gambler, said we should take a chance and pointed out that if the worst came to the worst we could switch to another director at any time. I had already decided that Dicky had the energy and ambition that would be so important, and said so. At an evening meeting with Charlie and Bud in the Belgravia home of my agent, John Mather, a handshake deal was done. As I had promised everyone, Dicky stuck to my script and the weather was kind to us. For Dicky it was the beginning of a long and illustrious directing career and I am flattered that *Oh! What A Lovely War* is clearly his proudest achievement and the film with which his name is principally associated.

My years in film production were not a time of unalloyed joy but it provided challenges and delights in abundance. The crews and actors with whom I worked were talented and hard-working and did everything to help me. There was a lesson to learn every minute. For anyone who wants to know exactly how a movie is made there is no better way than to sign each and every cheque, with someone standing by to answer questions about the money's destination. For most of my lessons, I gladly give credit to Mack Davidson, a wartime Spitfire pilot who, as my Executive Producer, guided and advised me constantly and became a close friend. Mack's contribution to the making of both films was

enormous. Mack died on the final day of shooting *Oh! What a Lovely War*. There had been no sign of illness and I was devastated. We had planned to make another film together and he had become like a wise and experienced elder brother to me.

Technology made the movie of *Oh! What a Lovely War* more complex than the stage show, which had the dashing exuberance that Joan Littlewood gave to everything she touched. My film would have no blood and no fighting, and death came as a bright red Flanders poppy. Brighton Pier – a glittering attraction – became the War, and from a constantly expanding booth General Haig sold tickets for it. Some film executives proclaimed such symbolism too subtle and for some perhaps it was. It was the skill and experience of Mack Davidson that gave me the confidence and encouragement that I needed to bring my unconventional movie ideas to fruition. Many other supporters deserve credits. I had a talented and indefatigable casting-director in Miriam Brickman. Casting was of course a vital ingredient and I was probably the first producer to use video equipment to cast most of the roles. This gave the actors the freedom to come to the Piccadilly office at any time convenient to them, and it gave me the chance to run, and rerun, the tapes as and when I had time, and to discuss the choices with Dicky Attenborough.

A crucial decision in the making of any musical entertainment is how to handle the transition from speech to song. In Joan's delightfully old-fashioned act-by-act music-hall style, the abrupt insertion of songs was expected and welcomed. But musical films demand a smooth transition into music and back to song. Operas had used recitative for centuries and in the nineteen-thirties Rodgers and Hart, working in Hollywood, invented a simple device of rhymed conversation with musical background that easily moved into their songs. I couldn't use this rhyming method because the entire dialogue for Joan's *What A Lovely War!* had actually been spoken during that war. I had added dialogue for scenes that were not in the stage version but I had kept to that restriction and used only words from the past. Joan introduced me to AJP Taylor, the eminent historian who had advised her, and he became an adviser to me and eventually a close friend. Getting everything right was a headache but it was an absorbing task. Perhaps my transitions were not perfectly smooth but they worked adequately.

The body movements of the actors and actresses – not just the dancers – were important to me and I brought in Eleanor Fazan, experienced choreographer, to oversee the whole production and to ensure that such devices as the leap-frogging officers could be smoothly integrated into the outdoor locations. Together with Eleanor I checked out every dancer to make sure they looked right for the wartime period. I wanted the costumes to be authentic and to conform to the changes that the progress of the war brought. I found Tony Mendleson, a distinguished and experienced costume designer, and he gallantly accepted as a historical adviser May Routh, an art school friend of mine who later became a successful costume designer in Hollywood. Her knowledge of military and civil uniforms and her experience as a fashion artist made a vital contribution to the film. The sketchbook she compiled during her research and the filming is a most lovely record and deserves to be published in volume form. To have the slings, medical dressings and bandages right I employed a Red Cross nurse to check such things prior to each shooting sequence. I had many sets built on the pier and I visited suggested locations well before schedule, so that I could switch to alternatives if needed.

There were still some surprises to come. I didn't fully appreciate the fact that movie credits can be a battlefield where determined Darwinians fought to enhance their reputation at the expense of others. I even had people asking me for a co-writing credit on my script. I had commissioned Ray Hawke, with whom I had studied at the Royal College of Art, to design the titles. They were original and beautiful and now in a childish attempt to shame the wannabes, I told Ray to remove my name from

the credits. But I had severely misjudged the clamorous ones. The removal of my name on encouraged the claimants.

Credit or no credit, the production company was entirely mine and the producer is the only person who can't be fired or even replaced. So in accordance with my contract with Paramount, I continued to nurse my film through the postproduction weeks and deliver it. I had learned a great deal from the previous film. No claimants were around now; postproduction is a lonely time, far removed from the glamour of lights and cameras. I watched and learned more every day as Kevin Connor, the film editor, cut it into shape and the complex sound track was trimmed and modified and a thousand small changes were supervised by truly dedicated technicians. By the time I had a final cut of the film I knew that these amazing things I had seen must not be wasted. I decided to write a book about the film business showing its joys and technicalities plus a few of its warts and wrinkles. *Close-Up* is not reality; writers go beyond reality to find and depict truth. *Close-Up* is the truth as I experienced it. A year or two later, one of the proudest moments of my life came as I stood at the bar of the London Ambassadors Club off Park Lane. Bud Ornstein said to me: 'I was reading one of your books recently and I thought this is someone who really knows about airplanes. Then I read *Close-Up* and thought this is someone who really knows about the movie business. Then I realized that you had written both of them.'

I hope you will share Bud's satisfaction. If not, you can try one of my aviation stories, my historical books or one of my spy stories. All that remains to be said about *Close-Up* is that although it reflects what I learned producing two films it is in no way an account of that experience or a memoir. The twists and turns, vendettas, deals, disappointments and betrayals are not specific ones and none of the characters depicts real people living or dead. But these fictional people are real to me.

When, years later, in a rather mangled version, a DVD was made of *Oh! What A Lovely War* I was not invited to contribute an interview. Marshall Stone would have understood.

Len Deighton, 2001

In the recent past it has become fashionable for writers to use thinly disguised biographical material about 'show-business' figures, but I have not intended to depict any person, living or dead, or any film, institution or corporation, past or present.

Len Deighton

Today we spend eighty per cent of our time making deals and twenty per cent making pictures.

Billy Wild

The heavy blue notepaper crackled as the man signed his name. The signature was an actor's dashing autograph, bigger by far than any of the text. It began well, rushing forward boldly before halting suddenly enough to split the supply of ink. Then it retreated to strangle itself in loops. The surname began gently, but then that too became a complex of arcades so that the whole name was a but deleted by well-considered decorative scrolls. The signature was a diagram of the man.

Marshall Stone. It was easy to recognize the hero of *Last Vaquero*, the film that had made the young English actor famous in 1949. He'd sat at this same desk in the last reel, reflecting upon a wasted life and steeling himself to face the bullets. For that final sequence he'd required two hours' work on his face. Now he would not need it.

A lifetime of heavy make-up had ravaged his complexion so that it needed the expensive facial with which he provided it. Around his eyes the wrinkles were leathery and the skin across his cheeks and under his jaw was unnaturally tightened. The shape of his face and its bone structure would have little appeal to a portraitist, and yet its plainness could be changed by the smallest of pads, too clamps or hairpieces, or by a dab of colour over the eyes or a shadow down the bone of the nose. Just the blunt military moustache, grown for his latest role, ensured that some of his dearest fans and nearest friends needed a second look to identify him.

Nor had the ageing process provided Stone with more character. Like many of his contemporaries he'd grown his hair long enough to cover his ears and make a fringe on his forehead. This hairsty framing his severe face made it difficult to guess what his occupation might be. His clear blue eyes as bright as a girl's and as active as a child's – might just be a tribute to the eye drops that he put in them. His raven hair suggested the judicious use of dye. His chesty actor's stride could just as well be that of a seaman or an athlete. Only when he spoke was it possible to label him. The classless over-articulated speech that RADA students assumed so well that few of them ever lost its pattern:

'Jasper, are you there, Jasper?'

Jasper – driver, bodyguard and valet – was seldom out of earshot. He came into the room and closed the curtains. A summer storm had darkened the sky. The study had become dim except for the desk lamp which painted a green mask across Stone's face and chopped his bright hands off at the wrists.

'Yes, sir.'

'A letter to post, a cheque for the club and an open cheque so that you can get me some cash.'

'Very good, sir.'

The bank would remain open for him. Stone had not yet grown blasé about the favours that money could provide. He'd told them six-thirty, but they'd wait: they'd learned that artistes had little sense of time. Through the heavy brocade the London traffic could be heard.

'I waste a lot of money gambling, Jasper.'

'You do have bad luck, sir.'

Stone was not a social reformer and yet his servants made him feel guilty. That's why he was secretive about his afternoon naps and about his shopping sprees. He insisted that they knock before opening the doors so that he could be alert and industrious when they came upon him. It was for that reason, too, that he mentioned to them the worries and problems of his working life. As of the moment he was working on a film called *Stool Pigeon*.

'I'm doing the swamp scenes tomorrow. I hope they've fixed up better heating in the dressing room. Last week I spent four hours under the lamps before getting rid of that pain in my knee. Rog at the gym says that's the classic way to get arthritis.'

The servant didn't reply. Stone read the letter again.

*From the desk of
Marshall Stone*

Wednesday evening

Dear Peter,

The idea of a biography of me has come up from time to time but I have always vetoed it. However, a writer of your talent and reputation could bring a whole new dimension to it. Who better to do a star's biography than the man who wrote the very first script of *Last Vaquero*?

Now, no show-biz crap, Peter, a real warts-and-all portrait, and damn the publicity boys! And not just a book about an actor! A book about the electricians, the camera assistants, the extras, the backroom boys in production offices. In fact, about the way it all comes together.

Talk to my private secretary, Mrs Angela Brooks, and arrange our get-together as soon as you like.

The piece you did for your paper last month was damned good and mightily flattering to boot! I can't wait to see what you will do in a whole book devoted to such a humble thesp as,

MARSHALL STONE

He crossed out damned and inserted bloody, hooking the y of 'you' with the loop of its b. There should always be at least one alteration in a letter. It gave the personal touch. He put his signet ring into the hot bubbling wax and sealed both envelopes.

'Is Mr Weinberger here yet?'

'I showed him into the library, sir.'

'Good.' Stone's vocal cords had tightened enough to distort his voice, and he tasted in his mouth the bile that anxiety created. On such sudden visits his agent always brought bad news.

'He has documents with him. He's working on them. He seems content.'

Oh my God: documents. 'You gave him a drink?'

'He declined, sir.'

'People always decline, Jasper. You must persuade them.' Stone cleared his throat.

'Very good, sir.'

'Cut along to the bank, then, and be outside at eight-thirty: the Rolls, and tell Silvio I'll have m

usual table. I'll probably sleep here tonight. You can tell the servants at Twin Beeches to expect me for dinner tomorrow.'

'Yes, sir.'

Stone closed the roll-top desk, locked it and went to the bathroom.

He did little more than splash cold water on to his face. Then he dried it carefully, so that the worn yellow towel would not be soiled by eye-black. He selected high boots, a faded shirt, and tied a red kerchief at the throat. After looking in the mirror he retied it and put a crucifix around his neck on a fine gold chain. He tucked it into the front of his shirt. It was almost, but not quite, out of sight.

'Viney!' he said as he entered the library. He spread his hands wide apart in an almost orientalist gesture of hospitality. For a moment he stood there without moving. Then he walked to his agent and took the proffered hand in both of his.

Weinberger looked like a gigantic teddy-bear that had survived several generations of unruly children. He was tall, but of such girth that his Savile Row suit did little to flatter him. He had a dozen such suits, all of them equally undistinguished except for the cigarette burns that he inevitably made in the right side of the jackets. His hair was unkempt and his club tie was, as always askew. Under sadly sagging eyebrows his eyes were black and deep set. His nose was large and so was his mouth which only smiled to show the world that he would endure without complaint the slings and arrows that were his outrageous lot.

It was his desire to be as unsurprising as possible. He succeeded: except to the people who read the fine print in his contracts. His voice had the gruff melancholy that one would expect from such a man.

'Sorry it had to be tonight, Marshall. No real problem: a formality, really, but it needs your signature.'

Stone did not release the hand. 'It's good to see you, Viney. Damned good to see you.'

'Epitome Screen Classics – that's Koolman's new subsidiary – want TV rights for resale.'

Stone released the agent's hand. 'Do you realize that we only see each other to talk business, Viney? Couldn't we get together regularly – just for laughs, just for old time's sake?'

'I don't know why they let us have that approval clause in the contract. I'd put it in to sacrifice for something else.' Viney shook his head sadly. 'They left it in.'

'Business! That's all you think about. Have a drink.' Stone cocked his head and nodded, as if the affirmative gesture would change his guest's mind. Back in the days when ventriloquism was a popular form of entertainment, such physical mannerisms had encouraged wisecracks about the cocky little star being seated upon the knee of the doleful giant who was his agent. But these jokes had only been made by people who hadn't encountered Marshall Stone.

'No thanks, Marshall.' He looked at his notes: ' "Three years after completion of principal photography or by agreement." It's only got six months to go anyway.'

'A small bourbon: Jack Daniels. Remember how we used to drink Jack Daniels in the Polo Lounge at The Beverly Hills?'

Weinberger looked around the huge room to find a suitable space for his papers. Arranged upon an inlaid satinwood table there were ivory boxes, photos in silver frames, instruments to measure pressure, temperature and humidity, a letter-opener and a skeleton clock. Weinberger moved some of the objets d'art and used a small gold pencil to make a cross on both letters. 'It needs your signature here and here.' He put the pencil away and produced a fountain-pen which he uncapped and then tested

before presenting to his client.

Stone signed the letters carefully, ensuring that his signature was the same precise work that always was.

‘Read it, Marshall, read it!’

‘You don’t want me interfering with your end of it.’ He capped the pen and handed it back. ‘Which movie are we talking about, anyway?’

‘Sorry, Marshall. I’m talking about *Last Executioner*. So many shows are losing sponsors that they want to network it in the States to kick off the fall season. It looks like the Vietnam War is going to be the only TV show that will last out till Christmas.’ Stone nodded solemnly.

‘Except for the scene on the boat, I was terrible.’

‘They’ll want the sequels too. Leo said you gave a great performance. “Marshall gave a sustained performance – conflict, colour and confrontation.” You got all three of Leo’s ultimates.’

‘What does that schmuck know about acting.’

‘I agree with him, Marshall. Think of that first script – you built that character out of nothing.’

‘Five writers they used. Six, if you include that kid that they brought in at the end for additional dialogue.’

‘On TV they’ll be a sensation. Leo would like you to do a couple of appearances.’ Weinberger watched the actor’s face, wondering how he would react. He did not react.

‘And it was the kid that got the screenplay credit. For a week’s work!’

Weinberger said, ‘Serious stuff: the Film Institute lecture for the BBC and David Frost for the States – taped here if you prefer – and Koolman would put his whole publicity machine to work. We could get it all in writing.’

‘They’ll sink without a ripple, Viney.’

‘No, Marshall. If the TV companies slot them right they could be very big. And Leo is high on the spy bit at the moment.’

‘I don’t need TV, Viney, I’m not quite that far over the hill: not quite.’ Stone chuckled. ‘Anyway, they’ll die, a successful US TV show must appeal to a mental age of seven.’

‘A lot of TV viewers don’t have a mental age of seven. I like TV.’

‘No, but the men who buy the shows do have a mental age of seven, Viney.’ Stone poured himself a glass of Perrier water and sipped it carefully. He knew that the contract was just an excuse. His agent’s real purpose was to talk about TV work.

‘Now come on, Marshall.’

‘Screw TV, Viney. Let’s not start that again. All you have to do is nod and then take your ten per cent. I’ve got just one career but you’ve got plenty of Marshall Stones in the fire.’ He smiled and held the smile in a way that only actors can.

Weinberger was still holding his fountain-pen and now he looked closely at it. The very tips of his knuckles were white. Stone went on, ‘Like that blond dwarf Marshall Stone, named Val Somers. You made sure he got his pic in the paper having dinner with the Leo Koolmans at Cannes. Good publicity, that: national papers, not just the trades. Is that why you didn’t want me to go along when *Snap, Crackle, Pop* was shown there?’ Stone said the words in a low pleasant voice, but he allowed a trace of his anger to show. He had been bottling up that particular grievance for several months.

‘Of course not.’

‘Of course not! Have you seen what he does in *Imperial Verdict*? The whole performance is what he did in *Perhaps When I Come Back*. Three people have mentioned it – a straight steal.’

Weinberger went across to the sofa, opened his black leather document-case and put the papers in it.

Stone said, ‘Will you please answer me.’

Weinberger turned and spoke very quietly. ‘That kid isn’t going to take any business from you, Marshall. You are an international star, Val’s name’s not dry in *Spotlight*. He’s getting a tenth of your price.’

Stone walked across to his agent, paused for a moment, shook his head regretfully and then gripped Weinberger’s arm. It was a gesture he used to pledge affection. ‘Sometimes I wonder how you put up with me, Viney.’

Weinberger didn’t answer. He had been close to Stone for a quarter of a century. He’d learned to endure the criticisms and insults that were a part of the job. He knew the sort of doubts and fears that racked any actor and he knew that an agent must be a scapegoat as well as confessor, friend and father.

In human terms Stone might have benefited from a few home truths. He might have become more of a human being, but such tactics could cripple him as an actor.

And for Weinberger, Stone was by no means ‘any actor’, he was a giant. His Hamlet had been compared with Gielgud’s, and his Othello bettered only by Olivier. On the screen he’d tackled everything from Westerns to light comedy. Not even his agent could claim that they all had been successful but some of his performances remained definitive ones. Few young actors would attempt a cowboy role without having *Last Vaquero* screened for them, and yet that was Stone’s first major role in films. Weinberger smiled at his client. ‘Forget it, Marshall.’

Stone patted his arm again and walked to the fireplace. ‘Thanks for sending that *Man From the Palace* script, Viney. You have a fantastic talent for choosing scripts. You should have become a producer. Perhaps I did you no favour in asking you to be an agent.’ Again Stone smiled.

‘I’m glad you like it.’ Weinberger knew that he was being subjected to Stone’s calculated charm but that did not protect him from its effects. Just as confidence tricksters and scheming women do nothing to conceal their artifice, so Stone used his charm with the abrupt, ruthless and complacent skill with which a mercenary might wield a flame-thrower.

‘Do you know something, Viney: it might be great. There’s one scene where I come in from the balcony after the fleet have mutinied. The girl is waiting. I talk to her about the great things I’ve wanted to do for the country . . . It’s got a lot of social awareness. I’m the man in the middle. I can see the logic of the computer party and the trap awaiting the protestors. It’s got a lot to say to the kids in that film, Viney. Who’s going to play the girl?’

‘Nellie Jones can’t do it, they won’t give her a stop-date on *Wild Men*, *Wild Women* and they are four weeks over. Now I hear they’re testing some American girl.’

‘American! Haven’t we got any untalented inexperienced stupid actresses here in England, that they have to go to America to find one.’ Stone laughed grimly; he had to play opposite these girls.

Weinberger smiled as if he’d not heard Stone say the same thing before. ‘I told them how you would feel. You’ll only consider it if the rest of the package is right. But I didn’t say that a new kid wouldn’t be OK. If the billing was right.’

‘Only me above title?’

‘That’s what I had in mind,’ admitted Weinberger.

‘Perhaps it would be better like that.’

‘No rush, Marshall. Let’s see what they come up with: we have the final say.’

‘It’s a good story, Viney.’

‘It was a lousy book,’ warned Weinberger.

‘Eighteen weeks on the best-seller list.’

Weinberger pulled a face.

‘You miserable bastard, please have a drink.’ Stone held up the stopper of a cut-glass decanter.

‘It makes me careless and you fat.’

‘A tiny one?’

‘OK, Marshall, if you need the reassurance, pour me a pint of your best scotch. But I won’t drink it.’

‘You’re an obstinate old sod.’ Stone put the stopper back into the decanter.

‘That’s why you need me to represent you. I really don’t mind being disliked.’

‘And I do?’

‘Yes, you do.’

Stone chased a block of ice with a swizzle stick. ‘It’s good, the deal we made for *The Executioner*?’

‘It’s the most anyone ever got from Leo Koolman for that kind of package.’

‘I’ll send Leo a little present. Perhaps a first edition, or cufflinks.’

‘No.’

Stone looked up in surprise. Weinberger said, ‘It will make him wonder if we’ve put one over on him.’

‘You’re a devious bastard, Viney.’ Stone toasted him before drinking.

Weinberger smiled. ‘In Perrier water?’

Stone nodded, and sipped at the water. Then he put the glass down and tightened the knot of his neckerchief before consulting his gold Rolex. Once such a watch had been the prime ambition of every film actor. Now kids like Somerset flaunted Micky Mouse timepieces that anyone could afford. ‘Let’s go to dinner, Viney.’

Weinberger recognized it as Stone’s way of taking his leave. He said, ‘I’ve got a wife and dinner waiting. Another hour and both will go cold on me.’

‘Yes, phone Lucy. She must come too. My God, how long since I last saw Lucy.’

Weinberger smiled.

‘No, seriously.’

‘Off you go, Marshall. I’ll just use the phone and be off. I’ll let myself out.’

‘Ring for anything you want.’ Stone touched some of the tiny roses that he’d brought up from his country garden that morning. He missed the garden when work forced him to stay in his London flat. ‘Will you take the roses with you; for Lucy with my love.’ Weinberger nodded. Stone was reluctant to leave without being quite sure that his agent did not bear a grudge for his peevish outburst. It was one of his most awful – and most unfounded – fears that Weinberger would refuse to work with him any more. Or, worse, that Weinberger might deliberately go slow on Stone’s representation while pushing

some other client.

‘It was good to see you, Viney, it really was.’ He paused long enough in front of a mirror to be sure his hair looked right. Then, still smiling to Weinberger, he let himself out through the carved double doors that had once been part of a Mexican church.

Weinberger heard Stone greet someone outside in the hallway. A girl’s voice replied. Then he heard the front door of the apartment close and soon after that the sound of the doors of the Rolls and the its motor as it accelerated along Mount Street.

Weinberger looked around the room. It had hardly changed since a fashionable decorator had designed it almost ten years before. The colour scheme was pink and blue-grey and even the collection of snuff-boxes had been selected so that those colours predominated. An appearance of spontaneity had been achieved by the big bowls of cut flowers and the casual placing of the footstools and the cushions, and yet these had been ordained by the designer. The three silk-covered sofas were still arranged around the fireplace in the same way. Even the expensive illustrated books and the silver cigarette-box and lighter were the same ones in the same positions.

Weinberger helped himself to a cigarette and lit it before dialling the president of Koolman International Pictures Inc. It was some time before the agent was given a chance to talk, but finally he was able to say, ‘Well, I agree, Leo, but an actor must make his own decision about a thing like this. You don’t want him blaming you after, and I don’t want him blaming me.’

Again there was a speech by Koolman, then Weinberger said, ‘All actors are frightened of TV, they think it means they are on the decline. Especially a series – Marshall would certainly do a one-shot for you, or a spectacular, but an option for twenty shows is too many. Let me tell Marshall it’s ten. After the first few it will either be such a success that he’ll go along, or be such a failure that you won’t want more than five.’

Again Weinberger listened. Then he said, ‘OK, Leo, and I’d like to show you some girls to play the wife . . .’ silence, then, ‘Well, yes, and I wouldn’t mind that either,’ he laughed. ‘Goodbye, Leo, and thanks.’

Jasper switched off the tape-recorder and looked at Marshall Stone. The actor got to his feet and smoothed his tight slacks over his thighs. The girl looked up at him, but her face was expressionless.

‘Bloody Judas,’ said Stone finally. ‘He takes ten per cent of my gross income . . .’ he turned to the girl, ‘. . . gross, mark you, not net. It’s a bloody fortune.’ She nodded. ‘And he plots against me in my own home.’ He turned to Jasper. ‘Pity you couldn’t fix it so we could hear the other end.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘OK, Jasper. Goodnight. I’ll drive Miss Delft home.’

‘Goodnight, sir.’ Jasper closed the tape-recorder and put it away before going out. As soon as the door closed the girl got to her feet and put her arms round Stone’s neck. ‘We can’t go on meeting like this,’ she said, and giggled.

‘Seriously,’ said Stone, ‘you’re the only one I have. You’re all I live for, darling.’

‘I know,’ said Suzy Delft.

What does [Upton] Sinclair know about anything? He's just a writer.

Louis B. Mayer

1949

'All my brother ever wanted to do is make this a better town.'

The taller of the two men fingered the lock of the safe and turned to face the angry young cowhand. 'Wait a minute, boy. Americans built this town with bare hands and know-how: anyone who don't like it here can go back to where they come from.'

The young cowboy leaned across the banker's desk and spoke in the manner of a man trying hard to control his temper. 'Did you ever walk as far as your own ranch-house, Mr Sanderson? Did you ever see what kind of shacks those Mexicans live in, did you?'

'Would,' explained the banker, 'but I just can't stand the smell.' He smiled.

They both turned as a sound of gunfire and galloping horses grew louder. Half a dozen horsemen galloped past, firing six-guns into the air. The young cowboy said, 'Seems like you might be taking yourself a long deep sniff.'

Baxter kicked open the doors of the light-trap because he was balancing two thick-shakes and meat pastrami on rye: a Hollywood breakfast! I used my thumbnail to prise the lid off the shake carefully so as not to spill it. Around the cardboard lid, serpentine coils of film spelled out 'San Fernando Valley Drugstore established 1934'. I flicked it as far as the front row of seats. Some days I could hear the screen. I always sat at the very back of the viewing theatre alongside the glass panel of the projection room. The big fans were there, so I could ignore the 'No Smoking' signs without worrying about top brass wandering in to sniff and see why the red light was on. Baxter unwrapped my straw and arranged the hot sandwiches and dill pickle on a paper plate. He was flustered. Normally he would have ducked under the projection beam, but now the mayor of the township was only one inch high. He stamped around on Baxter's forehead.

'You're in the light, Baxter.' He nodded but he hadn't heard me. I wondered why I'd put up with him for five years, but in 1944 only dopes like Baxter and layabouts like me had escaped the Army.

'You're in the light,' I said again.

'They are not renewing your contract, Peter.'

We both knew I didn't have that sort of contract. I was on monthly salary and that's all they had to give me to say goodbye.

I started on the sandwich. 'Every day I tell you, no lettuce. Every day!'

It wasn't really unexpected. I was fighting a desperate rearguard action to protect my script against a 'creative producer'. That's always a mistake, but in 1949 it was a fatal one.

'McCann, the cop on Gate Three, told me. There's an envelope waiting for you when you check out. The girl from accounts told him what was in it.' Things were tough all over: the mayor was being held down on Baxter's chest by three cowboys, and when Baxter moved they rippled.

I ate only the meat out of the sandwich. I put the thick-shake under my seat and got up. It was

bright idea to put fascist-style arguments into the mouths of my heavies, but like so many of my ideas it was sadly mistimed.

Baxter said, 'It was a great gesture, Peter. And on your kind of salary an unmarried guy can afford a gesture now and again.' I nodded. He said, 'You could talk to the Guild, but you'll be grabbed by Warner's, or Paramount, you see. You'll maybe double your take-home pay. It's the best thing that's happened to you.' He had a big smile fixed on his face and for a moment I was tempted to see how long he could hold it, but I remembered the good times.

'OK. I'll phone Jim tomorrow and tell him you are some kind of genius. He'll probably find you some other hack.'

'He will if you ask him, Peter. He respects you.'

'Sure.' I didn't turn the lights up. I groped along the seat backs and out of the double-doors of the viewing theatre number eight without saying another word. I suppose Baxter told the projectionist to stop showing *Last Vaquero*, or maybe it's still running. Anyway, it was a lousy script. Maybe the first draft I'd written would have made a decent film but the rewrite had got too much stuff about hard work and truth bringing success. That took care of any irony that I'd tried to bring to it. Koolman Studios had a standing order about 'values' and I'd been crazy to try to get by it, let alone to add a few ideas of my own.

I didn't realize that it was going to be the last time I walked through the Koolman Studios for over fifteen years. I blinked in the daylight and went past the big sound stages to the writers' building.

A tractor train with pieces of a Hawaiian village rumbled past. The kid driving it shouted something to me and I waved. A group of men in heavy make-up and silk dressing-gowns were standing outside the door of Number Two stage, smoking desperately. They looked up when the kid shouted and then looked at me. Already I felt a twinge of the paranoia that an investigating subcommittee had brought to Hollywood.

It was still only 8.45 A.M. on a February morning but the sun was bright enough to burn your eyes out. I called into my office to collect a couple of shirts and a half-completed short story. The typewriter and the ten-dollar fan belonged to the management.

From my window I could see the empty lot where walls and stairs were stored. Beyond it there was the block that housed the accountants and the lawyers. Significantly, theirs was a two-storey brick building with fitted carpets and air conditioning; the writers' 'block' was two timber sheds linked by a dimly lit corridor that was part of film storage.

Around the Koolman layout there was a high white stucco wall surmounted with rows of barbed wire and broken glass, but the executive building faced inwards to bright green lawns above which hovered white sprinkler mist. I took the forbidden short-cut to the main gate. It was time I lived dangerously. I passed Leo Koolman – the Studio's whizz-kid – and my producer Kagan Bookbinder. They were sitting in Bookbinder's brand-new convertible. It was bright red, with a grinning chromium front that people who were still on the waiting-list for new cars called 'Japanese Admirals'. The car radio was singing quietly.

Bookbinder was trying to remember how to look embarrassed, but then decided I'd not had my news yet. He was a tough-looking bastard, like an extra for the desert island set that had been in constant use since Pearl Harbor day.

Leo Koolman was a vain kid with a perfect suntan and a Hawaiian shirt with red and orange flowers on it. In those days he was tipped as the only person with the youth, drive and experience to get the

studio out of the jam it was in. As one of his first victims I still find it difficult to admire his judgement.

Koolman said, 'Do you know the nominees?'

'The Academy Awards,' Bookbinder explained. 'They weren't on the early bulletin. We're waiting for the nine o'clock.'

'*Hamlet*,' I said, 'Laurence Olivier.'

'You're guessing,' Koolman accused. He was hoping that I wasn't just guessing. A British winner would automatically mean a rise in the Stone stakes.

'Who else?' I said cockily. 'Dan Dailey, Clifton Webb?'

'You could be right,' admitted Bookbinder, smiling and bull-shitting to the end.

Koolman wasn't so admiring. 'All writers are supposed to use Gate Three.'

I smiled to both of them and kept walking.

'You think Olivier for best actor?' Koolman called.

'And Shakespeare will get "story and screenplay".'

The nine A.M. newscast gave the nominations as I'd predicted: Dan Dailey, Clifton Webb, Leo Ayres and Montgomery Clift. Seven weeks later Olivier got his Oscar. Leo Koolman was heard to describe me as psychic but he didn't come offering me a seer's job. Perhaps because Shakespeare looked out to John Huston.

Olivier was an easy guess. The previous year – in a tussle with Colman, Peck, Garfield, Powell and Redgrave – he might have been given a tougher run for his money but there was a growing feeling that Hollywood had been kissing its own backside for too long. *Hamlet* was a fine opportunity to break the tradition that only US productions got the award.

In spite of their accents, at least these limeys spoke some kind of English, and no one could say that the bard was a commie. The 'best actor' was foreign, but at least he was a 'sir' with three previous nominations behind him. It was on this ripple of reckless xenophilia that Leo Koolman launched Marshall Stone to his place in cinema history.

News of neither my genius nor my prescience had spread to script departments of the other studios. Whether I was blacklisted or merely redundant I never found out, but after nearly three months explaining my screen credits and the ones that got away, I nursed my old Ford back to New York in easy stages.

I hadn't liked New York in 1944 and I didn't like it all over again in 1949. I wrote indifferently advertising in the copy department of a Madison Avenue agency for three months until my air conditioner went out of action in late August. A decision I had been deferring for several weeks was made easier when the agency merged and I was the 'last in' that a management agreement had promised would be 'first out'.

It was only after I got back to London that my luck changed. I wrote a biography – *Stanislavsky: Man and His Method*. It was a labour of love financed by a job as a bartender. It was a book-club selection. I followed it the following year with a history of Italian opera that was little more than a compendious reference book. Then, after two years hard work, I had a lucky success with my biography of Caruso. Soft-cover rights enabled me to pay off the mortgage on my small house in Islington, and serial rights put something into the bank and got me a contract as entertainment editor on a posh Sunday newspaper.

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