

# **ONE MAN'S FLAG**

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**ONE  
MAN'S  
FLAG**

DAVID DOWNING

**SOHO  
CRIME**

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*This book is dedicated to my grandfather,*

***Gerald Percy Constantine,***

*who served in India during the Great War  
and many years later introduced me  
to the joy of making up stories.*



If you insist upon fighting to protect me, or “our” country, let it be understood, soberly and rationally between us, that . . . as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.

—VIRGINIA WOOLF





# **ONE MAN'S FLAG**



# Historical Note



The Britain that went to war in 1914 was more than an island state on the edge of Europe. The British Empire also included largely self-governing dominions, colonies ruled by London's appointees, and, in the case of Ireland, another island nation long subsumed by its larger neighbor.

When war broke out, the white-settler-ruled dominions—Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa—took it for granted that Britain's fight was theirs and sent soldiers across the world to play their part in the motherland's struggle. But it was different for those living under direct British rule, who were given less choice in the matter and who had less stake in the outcome. In many such places—India and Ireland foremost among them—resentment of British rule was already growing at a rapid pace, and those demanding greater autonomy were bound to see the empire's moment of peril as their moment of opportunity.

In India the movement for self-rule was led by the Congress Party, most of whose leaders, including Mohandas Gandhi, were prepared to accept the British argument that change would have to wait until after the war. But there were also powerful groups in both Punjab and Bengal that refused to wait and

instead set about mounting campaigns of violence against British rule.

The situation in Ireland was similar. The long campaign for Home Rule—a roughly analogous status to that enjoyed by the white dominions—had finally been won in 1914, only to be postponed when war broke out. This was accepted by many but failed to satisfy those demanding full independence. And here, as in India, there were many who believed that the wait had already been too long.

As always, an enemy's enemy might prove a useful friend. Even before the war, both Irish and Indian groups had reached out to the Germans, and once the fighting was under way, these contacts were pursued with increasing vigor.

# A German Who Could Pass for an Englishman



High on Darjeeling's Observatory Hill, Jack McColl stared out at the snow-draped Himalayas. The view was as magnificent as everyone in Calcutta had told him it would be, so he sat there on the British-manufactured wrought-iron bench and tried to take it in. And all he could see was the glow in Caitlin Hanley's eyes as their train snaked through the snow-clad Rockies.

A year had passed since then. Eight months since the day she'd stormed out of his London flat, leaving him feeling like the ultimate fool.

Eight months of war and worrying about his brother. Eight months of waiting for Caitlin's brother to meet his executioners. Eight months of wishing he hadn't betrayed her.

He sighed and looked at his watch. It was time he went to arrange his meeting with the German internee.

When war broke out the previous August, Jürgen Rehmer had been a high-ranking employee of the North German Lloyd shipping company, with a plush office on Calcutta's Dalhousie Square, a beautiful villa overlooking the Maidan, and many close friends among the British community. Then the news of hostilities had reached India and armed police had appeared at his door. Within a matter of hours, he and his wife were on their way

to the hastily established internment camp at Katapahar, a few miles south of Darjeeling. They'd been there ever since.

McColl took the path back to Chaurasta Square, making sure to scan the bushes on either side. He wasn't expecting an attack, but such caution had become second nature in Calcutta after so many terrorist incidents. Darjeeling was probably safe, although these days you never knew, and he no longer went anywhere without his Webley revolver.

The police station was on Auckland Road, not far below the square. He was escorted through to the local commissioner's office, where a fellow Scot named Gilzean was already waiting for him. A strong whiff of whiskey accompanied the handshake.

McColl took the proffered seat and looked around. The office was almost as sparse as his hotel room. A map of the district adorned one wall, but the others were bare, and the highly polished desk boasted only a single pen, a wooden tray containing a small sheaf of papers, and a framed photograph of several men standing over a dead tiger.

"The camp's about five miles south of here," Gilzean told him. "I assume you'll be wanting to see your man tomorrow morning?"

"That sounds good. How do I get there?"

"I'll have one of our chaps take you down in a tonga. We try not to use our automobile unless we have to—the roads are a nightmare. He'll pick you up at nine, all right? And I'll telephone the camp and let them know you're coming."

"Have you met Rehmer?"

"Aye, once. A decent chap for a Hun, but then I suppose most of them are. It's a pity the ones that aren't seem to be in charge."

"Yes." Since there seemed nothing more to say, McColl got back to his feet.

Gilzean wasn't done. "So what do you want with the man?" he asked.

There was no obvious reason not to tell him. "Some information about someone else. Back in August, when he was questioned in Calcutta, he mentioned a name that has come up

several times in connection with gunrunning. He was questioned again in January—”

“I know. He refused to say anything. What makes you think he'll change his mind?”

“His wife's ill.”

“Ah.” Gilzean's initial reaction was a look of disgust, but he managed to shrug it away. “We are at war,” he said, as much to himself as McColl.

“We are indeed,” McColl agreed. And where would they be without that comforting mantra? he wondered, walking back up the hill toward his hotel. To his ears at least, it sounded a tad more hollow with each passing Indian day.

**WHEN HE WOKE UP THE** following morning, the mountains had disappeared behind a curtain of mist. Over breakfast he went over what he knew about Rehmer, which wasn't very much. The German had been good at his job, an affable dinner guest, better than average on the polo field. Two British neighbors had spoken out against his arrest but had quickly withdrawn their protests when news of the German behavior in Belgium had reached Calcutta. With a British victory now clearly essential at any price, locking up a few relative innocents for a few months seemed a small one to pay. There were those like McColl's recently acquired friend Cynthia Malone who argued that there seemed little point fighting the Hun if you sank to his level, but such dissenting voices were few and far between. McColl had had no pat answer for them, other than a vague but strong sense that a victory for German militarism would be worse for the world than would a victory for Germany's opponents. And there was always the highly salient fact that the Germans were actively seeking to kill his brother, Jed, his old friend “Mac” McAllister, and their several hundred thousand comrades manning the trenches in France.

Which was why he was doing unpleasant jobs like this one, McColl reminded himself. Sometimes that seemed reason enough. Sometimes it didn't.

Emerging from the hotel entrance at nine o'clock, he found his transport ready and waiting. The driver, a young Bengali policeman, introduced himself as Salil and the pony as Kipling.

"And how are you discovering Darjeeling?" the Indian asked in English once the tonga was moving.

"I like it," McColl answered, although as yet he'd seen precious little of the town. After leaving Gilzean the previous afternoon, he'd considered dining at the Darjeeling Club—the Calcutta Department of Criminal Intelligence chief had promised to get his name put down as a guest—but knowing the sort of people he'd encounter and what range of opinions would be slid, tipped, or shoved down his throat, he'd decided to eat at his hotel instead. After that he'd retired to his room and read a few more chapters of *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*, the new novel that Cynthia had insisted on lending him.

"Were you born here?" he asked Salil.

"No, sahib. In Calcutta."

"You prefer it here."

Salil shook his head. "When the sun shines, Darjeeling is a fine town. But in the rain and the cold . . ." He shivered at the thought. "And my wife and son are in Calcutta," he added.

Road and railway ran south in tandem, crossing each other at regular intervals as they climbed toward Ghoom. Densely wooded hillsides receded into the mist, and, hearing chanting in the distance, McColl thought he could see the blurred outlines of a monastery hanging above the valley. In Ghoom they turned east down a gently winding road through tea plantations before arriving at their destination, a cluster of wooden buildings on a partially cleared, east-facing slope. Although two sepoy guards guarded the gate, the fences on either side looked eminently scalable. But then where would an escapee run to? The remoteness of the camp's location was enough of a deterrent.

The internees were housed in two barracks, one for the men, one for the women and children. Many of the latter were playing outside, apparently enjoying themselves, but McColl found it hard to imagine how the adults filled their days in a place like



this, particularly since none of them knew when if ever they would be released.

One of several wooden cabins housed the administration, and the man in charge—a Yorkshireman named Marshall—was waiting for him on the veranda. The man shook hands but seemed disinclined to conversation. “You can use my office inside,” he told McColl, and without waiting for assent ordered a loitering subordinate to “bring Rehmer up here.” Two minutes later McColl was alone with the German.

Jürgen Rehmer looked all of his fifty-four years, with a face badly worn by life in the tropics. He was about six feet tall, with cropped gray hair, blue eyes, and regular features. He was, as the saying went, one of those Germans who could pass for an Englishman. McColl found himself idly wondering whether the Germans had the contrary saying.

Speaking German, McColl asked Rehmer how he was.

As well as could be expected, was the gist of the answer.

“And your wife?”

“She is unwell.”

“I heard that she was and am sorry to hear she still is. But perhaps I can help in that regard.”

Rehmer’s look was both hopeful and suspicious. “You will have to explain that.”

McColl sighed. “I won’t insult you with pretense. I’m here to offer you a deal—you tell me everything you know about Franz Kopping and you and your wife will go free. I will personally escort you both to Calcutta, and once she has received the medical treatment she needs, I’ll put you both on a boat to some neutral port. Batavia, I expect. From there you can go where you want.”

Rehmer shifted slightly in his chair and gave McColl a long, cold stare. “Let us be clear,” he said eventually. “You are asking me to choose between my wife and my country.”

“Yes,” McColl agreed. If their positions had been reversed, he knew which he’d have chosen, but a man like Rehmer probably loved them both with a similar kind of passion.

“And you consider such a proposition honorable?”

“I’ve had jobs I enjoyed more,” McColl admitted wryly.

“But you’re just following orders?”

“Something like that.”

Rehmer shook his head. “My inclination is to tell you to go to hell. But I’m not the only one involved. I shall have to discuss this with my wife.”

McColl nodded his agreement. If he was going to play this sordid game, he might as well play it to win, and giving Rehmer a decent stretch of time to dwell on the future loss of his wife might possibly do the trick. “I’ll be back in two days,” he told the German.

Once Rehmer had been led away, McColl asked Marshall how ill the wife was.

“Hard to say,” was the answer, “but I think she’ll last long enough for your purposes.”

McColl ignored the gibe. “What does she need in the way of medicines?” he asked.

“She doesn’t, according to our doctor. She just needs a drier climate.”

On the ride back to Darjeeling, McColl was less than responsive to Salil’s cheerful chatter, and the sepoy eventually retreated into a hurt silence. After reporting the gist of his conversation with Rehmer to Gilzean, McColl walked up Auckland Road to the club, received the promised guest membership, and ate a large though unimaginative lunch. Several members introduced themselves, but taciturnity bordering on rudeness won him the solitude he wanted. Doubtless they all knew why he was here—Darjeeling in winter was a small community by Raj standards—and he had no desire to discuss his business, or indeed anything else, with any of them.

After eating he sequestered himself in the library, where a fortnight-old copy of *The Times* painted a glowing account of the recent British offensive near Neuve-Chapelle. Actually, as McColl knew from friends in Calcutta, the attack had been a disaster, with a quarter of the forty thousand troops involved either killed

or wounded. Since almost half of those casualties had come from the Indian Corps, London had lost no time in passing the bad news on to Delhi. There was quite enough disaffection already, and losses like this would only cause more. McColl thought it unlikely that the recent passage of a new Defence of India Act—one that gave the Raj authorities increasing powers of arrest and detention—was wholly coincidental.

Outside, it was still overcast, but he revisited Observatory Hill anyway, seating himself on the thoughtfully placed bench and staring out at the sea of mist that shrouded the valley and mountains. He didn't like this task he'd been given. He didn't much like being in India, so far away from the war's epicenter, but he was the only Urdu speaker the Secret Service Bureau possessed, and he did have experience dealing with Indian revolutionaries, albeit in San Francisco rather than India. The Ghadar organization he'd investigated in early 1914 had finally brought their revolt home to the Punjab a few weeks earlier, but it had swiftly fizzled out, largely thanks to the work of an Indian infiltrator. McColl had been mentally packing his bags when his boss, Mansfield Cumming, had decided that the escalating terrorist campaign on the other side of India required his attention.

Perhaps it did, but McColl was far from convinced. In Bengal a series of robberies and assassinations sponsored by the Jugantar terrorist group had brought the authorities close to panic, and by the time McColl reached Calcutta, the India Department of Criminal Intelligence, the local police, the India Office, and Vernon Kell's Military Intelligence Section Five had all been enlisted as part of London's response. There was, he soon found out, no shared agenda or accepted chain of command. As McColl had come to expect when intelligence agencies fished in the same stretch of river, each outfit was devoting as much time and effort to stealing its rivals' rods as it was to catching fish.

The newly assertive Jugantar was well organized and effective, its leader Jatin Mukherjee good at choosing and hitting his targets and adept at foiling British attempts to locate and arrest him. People were dying, the British *looking* increasingly helpless,

but as far as McColl could see, there was no chance of Jugantar's actually *winning*. Robbing a store in Roddha the previous August had netted the group fifty Mauser pistols, but all the intelligence pointed to these as the only guns it possessed. No, Jugantar was certainly an annoyance, and rather more than that to those it killed, but it didn't have the weaponry to mount a serious challenge, not on its own.

German help would be necessary, and there had been rumors—even plausible ones—that some contact had been made. And with their support for Ghadar, the Germans had demonstrated a definite interest in helping any Indian group that might cause the British sufficient trouble in the subcontinent to make them think twice about sending more troops to Europe.

One of these rumors had involved a businessman named Franz Kopping, and a subsequent investigation by the Singapore authorities had uncovered a past association with Jürgen Rehmer. Questioned the previous September, Rehmer had denied more than a passing acquaintance and claimed he knew nothing about German intelligence in Asia or arms shipments to India. Since then he'd been left to enjoy his captivity in peace, until some bright spark in the DCI office in Calcutta had picked up the news that Rehmer's wife was seriously ill.

A lever, as one man put it. An inducement.

Now that he'd met Rehmer, McColl found himself almost hoping that the German would treat his offer with the contempt it probably deserved. Which wasn't very patriotic of McColl, but the older he got, the less patriotic he felt. Growing up among people who wouldn't trust an Englishman any further than they could throw him, having a front-row seat at the establishment cock-up popularly known as the Boer War, and actually experiencing a whole host of other cultures—all of which suffered the same delusion that theirs was the best—would have put a dent in anyone's ability to swallow the risible notion of one's country right or wrong. Meeting Caitlin Hanley had just been the cherry on the cake.

McColl didn't believe that people like the Rehmers should

ever have been interned in the first place—deportation would have served the same purpose and been much less vindictive.

Some people claimed that war brought out the best in people. And maybe it did—it sure as hell brought out the worst.

McColl walked back down the hill and stopped off at the club to write a couple of letters. He filled the one to his brother with jokes, the one to his mother with vignettes of life in India. After dropping them off at the post office, he walked back to his hotel for another hour with *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*. It wasn't a book to cheer one up, but it was certainly hard to put down.

**NEXT DAY THE SKY REMAINED** overcast, Kangchenjunga and the other peaks hidden from view. After breakfast McColl walked north up the ridge, passing St. Andrew's Church and a dead-looking Government House, eventually reaching a native village, where one of the inhabitants asked with some concern whether the sahib was lost. Back in Darjeeling he had drinks and lunch at the club, where a rumor was going the rounds that two Germans had escaped from the Katapahar camp. No one thought they'd get far, and McColl wasn't worried that Rehmer would be one of them—he didn't seem like the sort of man who would ever abandon his wife. He ordered another whiskey and listened to the old hands at the next table tell a recently appointed plantation manager that he'd arrived too late to experience the real India. How the Indian waiters kept a straight face was anyone's guess.

McColl had hoped the sky would clear so he could take in the famous view from Tiger Hill, but nature refused to cooperate, and he settled instead for a walk to a nearby Tibetan temple. The going was mostly downhill on the way, and soon after passing a white stupa with a low dome and golden spire he saw the temple in the distance, amid a forest of poles bearing brightly colored prayer flags. The forecourt contained several prayer wheels. After leaving some money, he gave one a spin and offered up a half-serious prayer that Caitlin Hanley would forgive him. Some hope.

The trek uphill was much more demanding, and by the time McColl reached Auckland Road, he was seriously out of breath. Remembering the rumored escape, he stopped in at Gilzean's office to find out if one had actually occurred. It had. Two young men—boys, really, as neither was yet sixteen—had left the camp early the previous night without telling their parents. According to friends, they intended to walk to China and then somehow find their way back home to Germany, where of course they planned to enlist. Gilzean was unsympathetic, but to McColl they were just another pair of victims, in thrall to the general madness. Later that evening, gazing out his hotel window at the rapidly darkening hills, he wondered whether the two boys had begun to regret their patriotic impulse.

**IF THEY HAD, IT HADN'T** been for long. McColl's arrival at the police bungalow on the following morning coincided with that of a cart containing two young bodies. One blond boy had two exit wounds in his chest; the other had half his head blown away. Both looked younger than their fifteen years.

The soldiers escorting the cart seemed in an ebullient mood; one or more of their Lee-Enfield MkIIIs had no doubt done the damage. Shot trying to escape, as the saying went.

Gilzean had the decency to look embarrassed, but no one was going to kick up a fuss about a couple of dead Germans, not after Belgium.

McColl had his own concern: "Do the other Germans in the camp know what's happened?"

"They soon will—the army sent someone down to warn the camp commander."

McColl sighed. "Well, there goes any chance of getting Rehmer to talk."

Gilzean shrugged. "Maybe he'll realize we mean business."

McColl gave him a look but didn't try to argue. He took the ride back up to Katapahar with Salil and faced Jürgen Rehmer across Marshall's desk for the second time. The German was coldly contemptuous. "The answer is no."

“And your wife is happy with that?” McColl asked, hiding his own self-disgust.

Rehmer's look was pitying. “I would have given you what you asked,” he told McColl. “It is she who insists I say no.”

**AFTER THE GUARD HAD TAKEN** the German away, McColl sat there for several minutes staring out through the open doorway at the limply hanging Union Jack and fog-shrouded trees beyond. He told himself what Rehmer had told him at their previous meeting, that he was simply following orders. It didn't help.

**THE SKY REFUSED TO CLEAR**, either that afternoon or overnight, and mist still clung to the rooftops when McColl left Darjeeling on the following morning. He could still visualize Kangchenjunga and the other peaks in all their awesome splendor, but he knew that the image that would truly stick in his mind was the one of the two slaughtered boys in the cart.

When they reached Tindharia, the train from Siliguri had already arrived, and several tables in the restaurant room were occupied by British families intent on escaping the imminent prospect of Calcutta's stifling spring and summer. It was allegedly well worth escaping. McColl's only previous experience of real heat had been his summer in South Africa, and according to those who had suffered through both, the Bengali version was several times worse.

Thinking about South Africa as his train continued its descent, he remembered that Gandhi had arrived back in India a few months earlier. The now-famous Indian had been one of the stretcher bearers who had carried McColl down from Spion Kop, and McColl had followed Gandhi's political career ever since. It would be good to see him again, he thought, if only to ask the Indian why he had pledged his support to the British war effort. After what Caitlin had told him about Gandhi's pacifist ideals, it had seemed a surprising position for the Indian to take, but one that McColl had found vaguely comforting. There was no

shortage of knaves and fools who supported the war, and having someone of Gandhi's humanity and intelligence defending its necessity made McColl feel a little better about his own reluctant belief that it had to be fought and won. He would love the chance to discuss it with him. Gandhi was in Ahmedabad, on the other side of the country, but maybe their paths would cross again.

The wait at Siliguri seemed endless, but the Mail left on time at 8:00 P.M. His private berth in the first-class coach was spotless, and once the attendant had been convinced that all he needed was sleep, McColl was left alone with the rhythm of the wheels until they reached Santahar, where a change of gauge meant a change of train. He was awakened again by the drumming of the wheels on the new Hardinge Bridge across the Ganges. Opening his window to a warm, caressing breeze, he saw the almost-full moon hanging above the vast river, the smoke from their engine smudging the first light of morning.

By the time they reached the next stop, it was light enough to read by the window, and after buying a clay pot of tea from one of the platform sellers, he reached for Tressell's book. Before going to sleep, he had read the chapter called "The Great Money Trick," in which the hero, Owen, during a work break, explains the essence of the capitalist system to his fellow workers. It was cleverly written, and try as he did, McColl could find no flaw in Tressell's logic. The system did seem like a giant sleight of hand.

Why was he reading a socialist tract? To know the enemy, as he'd jokingly told his Section Five counterpart Alex Cunningham? To prove how open-minded he was to friends like Cynthia? Neither, in truth. It wasn't the first such book he'd read over the last six months, and he knew the reason all too well—Caitlin Hanley. The woman he'd loved and deceived and whose rebel Irish brother he'd caught, imprisoned, and effectively sentenced to death. Colm Hanley was still in Brixton Prison as far as McColl knew, awaiting execution.

McColl's relationship with Caitlin had opened his eyes to a lot



of inconvenient truths, particularly when it came to serving the British Empire. And eyes once opened were hard to close—he might not have seen her for over seven months, but he still saw the world, at least in part, through her ideals and explanations. Which both pleased and annoyed him. It was a way of keeping her in his life, but the continuing censure of someone who never wanted to see him again was sometimes hard to live with. Caitlin would find Tressell's critique self-evident and find fault only with the minor roles he gave to women.

McColl put the book down, wondering where she was now, what she was doing.

The train chugged on southward across flat delta country for the last hundred miles, stopping just twice before it slowed to a crawl for the final approach to Calcutta's Sealdah station. After arranging for the delivery of his luggage, McColl worked his way out through the teeming crowd to the tonga stand and climbed aboard the first in line. "Great Eastern," he told the driver, who wasted no time in whipping his pony into motion.

They cantered westward down Bow Bazaar. It was only nine in the morning, but noticeably hotter than it had been five days before, and by the time the tonga reached the corner of Dalhousie Square and turned down Old Court House Street, McColl could feel the sweat gathering on his forehead. The British bobby outside the hotel looked hotter still in his uniform, and the electric fans in the Great Eastern's lobby were already working overtime. Once ensconced in his room, McColl flicked the switch and stood for a while beneath his own whirring blades, reassessing his earlier thought that a cheaper hotel might be more discreet. He took a bath to wash off the journey and was drying himself when his luggage arrived from the station. The room boy who came with the porters had a cable from Cumming in London. Reading it, McColl learned that he had been formally seconded to the Calcutta DCI with instructions to uncover and thwart any German plans to arm the Bengali terrorists. Encrypted reports from Singapore, Batavia, and Bangkok would follow.

Almost as an afterthought, Cumming noted that Colm

Hanley's execution had been fixed for March 30. Reaching for *The Statesman* he'd picked up the station, McColl discovered that today was the twenty-ninth.

It was a moment he'd dreaded. If there was no last-minute reprieve, if Colm Hanley died in the same shooting-range shed at the Tower of London as his erstwhile republican comrades, then Caitlin would never forgive him.

McColl grimaced. Who did he think he was kidding? A reprieve, a pardon, neither would make any difference to her. A change of heart from Caitlin was as likely as snow in Calcutta.