

There's a clock outside the station. I looked at it every time I passed. At five thirty I stopped walking up and down. Some of the shops were just closing so I sat down in a doorway from which I could watch the station. I'd no idea what time he'd return, of course – it might be hours yet – but my feet were killing me and I had to sit somewhere. I could see the clock, so I kept an eye on that, too. I'd never known time pass so slowly.

At some point I fell asleep, and I must've slept a long time, because when the cold woke me it was after eleven and the station had closed. I'd no way of knowing whether Ginger had returned or not. I looked in all the usual kips and he wasn't in any of them. I couldn't face the night alone so I went to Captain Hook and surrendered every penny I had for a place on a boat, but this time there was no sweet dream.

Daily Routine Orders 11

Laughing Boy One. That was the code name of the exercise. It was meticulously planned and beautifully executed, and now it's time for de-briefing. In a well-regulated army, every operation is followed by a thorough de-briefing. A sort of inquest, if you'll pardon the grisly joke. So.

First, my intelligence work. The success of a given operation always depends on sound intelligence, and mine was a model of soundness. By golly it was. What I did was, I learned their names. Sounds simple, doesn't it? Elementary, but in fact it was absolutely crucial. I couldn't possibly have done what I did without it.

What did you do? I hear you ask. Well, it was simple. The best tactics are often the simplest. I dogged their footsteps till they separated. You remember I said a target must be alone? Well today, one of my laughing boys – Ginger – took the tube from Camden. At first I thought they were both going, but they parted at the station. The other scruff – Link, he calls himself, though Stink would be nearer the mark – started *begging along the High Street*. I went away for a while – the target obviously wouldn't be back for an hour or two at least – and then I came back and hung around, looking in shop windows and buying the occasional cup of char.

and I kept well out of his way – I didn't want him noticing me.

It turned out to be a long wait, and it could all have been for nothing because Link just wouldn't bopper off. It started to get dark and I kept expecting him to leave, but he didn't. Eventually he sat down in a doorway opposite the station and I thought, terrific. Thanks a lot, you idle, useless prat. It was obvious he was waiting for his mate. I nearly gave up, but it's a good job I didn't because the pillock fell asleep, and not long after that I spotted my target coming out of the station. It was time for the master-plan.

I'm wearing my woolly-headed do-gooder rig. I run across the road and grab him by the arm, looking anxious. 'Excuse me,' I gabble. 'Are you Ginger, by any chance?'

'Who's asking?' he says. He can see I'm in a state but he's cagey just the same. I shake my head.

'Never mind,' I tell him. 'You're Link's mate, aren't you?'

He frowns. 'What's all this about? Is something wrong?'

I nod, pulling at his sleeve. 'It's Link,' I gasp. 'An accident. He ran right out in front of me. I never had a chance.'

He gawps at me. 'He – you mean you knocked him down? Is he dead?' It's his turn to grab my sleeve. 'Have you killed my mate, you bastard?'

dead. Not when I left. Badly hurt, though. Asking for you.'

'Where? Where is he? Is he in hospital or what?'

'No, my place. He's at my place. It happened right outside.'

'He's badly hurt and you've got him at your place?' He stares at me, wild-eyed. 'Why didn't you call an ambulance, you stupid git? He could be dying, for all you know. You better take me to him.'

I was magnificent though I say it myself. Here was a hard, streetwise kid, cagey as they come, and he followed me home like a three-year-old. And of course everything was set when we got there. I'd rigged up the settee so it looked like somebody was lying on it under a blanket. I'd even squeezed the blood from half a pound of pig's liver on to the blanket and he fell for it, hook line and sinker. He ran straight to the settee, yelling at me to call an ambulance, and I nailed him when he went to lift the blanket.

That was Laughing Boy One. A brilliant operation, but I didn't hang about congratulating myself. I tidied up a bit, then it was time to launch Laughing Boy Two. I'd planned to use the same trick in reverse, but when I got to the High Street Link the Stink had gone. I mooched about a bit but there was no sign of him.

Still, never mind, eh? There's always tomorrow. Unless you're Ginger, I mean.

Next day was a Friday, and I spent it looking for Ginger. I tapped a bit as well – had to, or I'd have starved – but all the time I was looking for him and he didn't show. It's happened, I told myself. He's gone back to his real mates, like you always knew he might. I kept hoping though, deep down, and when you're missing someone you keep seeing them. There was this woman – Mrs Chambers – lived next door when I was a kid. When she was about fifty her husband died, and for ages afterwards she kept seeing him on the street or in the supermarket. She'd jump off the bus or abandon her trolley and go chasing after him, and of course it was always somebody else. And that's what it was like for me that Friday. I'd catch a glimpse of somebody across the road or through a shop window – somebody just like Ginger – and when I got close I'd find myself gawping at a stranger. It happened half a dozen times.

sat in a doorway on that bus, watching people go in and out of a posh chippy opposite. Normally the smell of the food would have driven me out of my tree, but I guess I was half out of it already. A little voice kept going Ginger, Ginger, like that. It was doing my head in. I thought, what if he's lying in hospital somewhere, unconscious, and nobody knows who he is? He might have walked past the end of this street a minute ago, looking for me. Or maybe he's lost his memory.

In the end, for something to do I got up and trailed along to the station. There was a guy just inside, selling the paper. He was there a lot and I knew him by sight. I walked past him a couple of times, then went up to him. 'Were you here last night?' I asked.

'Yeah.' He looked at me. 'Why?'

'I – I'm looking for someone. My mate. We were supposed to meet here last night. I wondered if you'd seen him.'

He shrugged. 'I seen a lot of people last night. Hundreds. What's he look like, this mate of yours?'

'Tallish. Red hair. Bit older than me. Carries a green pack. Ginger, they call him.'

'Hmm.' He nodded. 'I might have seen him. There was a guy like that last night. I remember

something about hospital. They went off together.'

'Which way'd they go?'

'I dunno, do I? Wasn't taking much notice. It might not have been him, anyway.'

'No.' I hesitated. 'Look - will you do me a favour?'

'Depends.'

'If you see him again, will you tell him Link's been asking after him?'

'Link?'

'Yeah.'

'He mentioned Link. The old guy. Link's had an accident. Something like that.'

'But - I'm Link. I haven't had an accident. Are you sure that's what he said?'

'Think so, yeah. The other guy acted sort of frantic - pulling him along, shouting.'

'And you didn't notice which way they went?'

'No, mate. Sorry.'

I hardly slept at all. Thoughts whirled round and round inside my skull and I was hungry as hell. There were loads of parked cars on Pratt Street and people kept coming past, chatting and laughing, banging doors and revving up. I was glad when it started to come light.

I had a coffee in an all-night joint and waited till it was time to go along to the market. I

but really I was hoping he'd be there.

He wasn't, but looking down from the walkway outside the toilets I spotted the girl Ginger had talked to in the caff. She seemed to be by herself this time. I pelted along the walkway and down the steps and found her looking at hats. I touched her sleeve.

'Hi.'

She returned my hi, but I could tell she didn't remember me.

'Link,' I reminded. 'I was with Ginger.'

'Oh, yeah. Where is he?'

'I was hoping you'd tell me.'

She shook her head. 'I haven't seen him since Thursday.'

'Me neither. Was it you he was meeting - in Holborn?'

She nodded. 'Me, Tim and Ricky - the guys you saw before. We meet at the Macklin Street Centre sometimes. Didn't he come back here?'

'I dunno.' I told her what the guy in the station had said. She shook her head. 'Ginger doesn't know anyone here 'cept Captain Hook.' She frowned. 'Accident? Hospital? Are you sure the guy wasn't winding you up?'

'Pretty sure.'

She pulled a face. 'Weird-o.'

I don't know your name?"

'Toya.' She smiled briefly. 'Well, it's not really, but it's what I like to be called.'

'I'm worried, Toya. I've looked all over. I don't know what to do.'

She shook her head. 'There's nothing you can do, Link. Guys like Ginger come and go, y'know? Move on. Maybe he found work.'

'Hmm.' I looked down, hacking at a muddy banana skin with the toe of my trainer. 'If you see him, will you tell him I've been looking for him?'

She nodded. 'Sure, if I see him, only don't hang by your feet, okay?'

'Thanks.' I had enough dosh for two coffees and meant to offer her one, but she moved off without saying goodbye and I thought, that's the secret. Don't let anybody close. Don't depend on anyone, 'cause they'll only let you down. I turned away. From now on, I told myself, I'll worry about me. Just me. It was a resolution I was to keep for about four minutes.

I went in the caff. The same one as before. I was trying not to look for Ginger, but looking anyway. There was one empty table. I got a coffee and sat down.

The New Me. That's what I was thinking. I

Right.

I nursed the coffee. It was warm in here and raw outside so it paid to stay put. I was half-way down the mug when she walked in.

She was dossing, I could see that, but she was the best looking dossier I'd ever seen. I noticed her hair first. Chesnut, spilling from under her green knitted cap like fire. Her eyes were terrific, too – dark and wide and shining like she'd just had twelve hours' kip. She had on a battered waxed jacket, torn muddy jeans and broken-down trainers, but she soared above her scruffiness – her looks and bearing sort of cancelled it out.

She didn't look at anybody as she crossed the caff, but everybody looked at her. I couldn't tear my eyes away. She got a Coke and turned, looking for somewhere to sit. Her eyes – those fantastic eyes – met mine for a second and I smiled. No chance, I told myself. Scruffy little git like you.

I was wrong. She came over. Every eye in the place followed her. She nodded at one of the three empty chairs. 'Anyone sitting here?' She sounded Scottish. I shook my head.

'Mind if I join you, then?' I nodded, saying nothing. Being the New Me. She unslung her pack, dropped it next to mine and sat down. I lifted my mug and sipped tepid coffee, gazing

unbelievable but that's all it was – acting. In the real world the blood was pounding in my ears and it was as much as I could do to keep from goggling at that fantastic face.

She inserted a straw in her Coke and sucked. When I risked a glance at her she dropped her eyes. I sipped more coffee, sensing her eyes on my face. I mean I could actually feel them, like lasers. After a bit she said, 'Have you been long in London?' Without looking at her I nodded.

'How long?'

'Year, year and a half,' I lied. Well – in five minutes she'd get up and walk away and we'd never meet again.

'That right?' She sounded suitably impressed. 'You'll know you way around, then?'

I shrugged. 'Some.' Man of few words.

'What d'they call you?'

'Link.'

'Link?' She sucked up Coke. 'What's that short for?'

'It's short for I have another name but prefer to be known by this one.'

'Sorry.' She looked sorry. 'I'm Gail.'

'Hi, Gail. Just landed, right?'

'Right.'

'From? Don't tell me if you don't want.'

'Glasgow.'

'Aye. Stepfather.'

'Ah – say no more.'

She looked at me. 'You too?'

'Uh-huh.' The New Me. The guy who doesn't let anybody get close and here I am, spilling my guts to the first stranger I meet because she's got nice hair and laser eyes. I drained my mug and pushed back my chair. 'I've gotta go.'

'Why?' She looked crestfallen. I shrugged.

'Things to do.' I stood up. This was costing me, but I wasn't going to wind up watching trains for her to come back.

'Don't go.' So simple. So direct. Something hot and heavy stirred in my chest. I hesitated, dangling my pack, looking down at her. 'What d'you want, Gail?'

Her eyes held mine. 'I'm scared, Link,' she murmured. 'I don't know what to do – how to live on the street.'

'You learn, Gail. That's all.' Oh yeah? sneered a voice inside my head. What about your dependence on Ginger, then – that urge to cling? It came to me that this was the first time I'd thought of Ginger since she walked in, and that was powerful medicine. Maybe we needed each other. I dropped my pack and sat down.

Daily Routine Orders 12

Oh dear, oh dear. Link the Stink's in love and Laughing Boy Two's up shit creek.

Yesterday – that's Friday – I made a mistake. A gross horror, like Hitler's invasion of Russia. If I'd concentrated on Link I might have had him, but I didn't. Instead I went looking for boots. Reconditioned Army boots.

Not for me. Oh, no. My marching days are over, as you know. These were for my army. The Camden Horizontals, as I've christened 'em. Four pairs I needed, all different sizes, and I got 'em, too, in Bethnal Green. 'Course they're not a perfect fit, none of 'em, but then they don't need to be. My lads'll not be doing a lot of yomping, so it doesn't matter if the footwear's a bit slack or a bit snug. All it has to do is shine, and it does.

Anyway, I lost my chance yesterday, and when I picked up his trail this morning he bumped into some tart in a caff up the market and they left together, so it's not going to be easy. I'll have to fall back. Re-group. Devise fresh tactics. And I'm the feller who can do it. By golly I am.

We hit it off, Gail and me, from the word go. She got me another coffee and we sat there talking, oblivious to everything around us. It was unbelievable. When you're homeless and hungry you're an outsider. Normal everyday experience doesn't apply to you. You know – things like having a job to go to, mates to meet, a motor bike to save up for. You don't buy CDs or get your hair cut or have dental check-ups or shop for clothes. You can't. Your circumstances put those sorts of things beyond your reach. To all intents and purposes you belong to a separate species, and one of the hardest bits is how it cuts you off from girls. If you're a guy, I mean. See – normally a young bloke sees a girl passing by and he'll smile and maybe call out something to her. Chat her up a bit. It doesn't mean anything and it won't usually lead to anything – it's just part of being young and on the loose

maybe one time in a hundred — it does lead to something and you've got a relationship which might or might not last. The important thing is that you're part of it, right? One of the guys. Or one of the girls. But if you're dossing, you're not. You try chatting up a girl when you're ragged and grimy and pasty-faced and your teeth are crummy and she knows you don't even have the price of a coffee. No chance. Not only will you not get off with her, you won't even get the smile. A dirty look and a wide berth's more like it. And the same in reverse if you're a girl, I guess. After a bit you start thinking of yourself as a different creature — a creature that lives beside ordinary people but isn't one of them.

So finding myself suddenly sitting in this caff, chatting with a fantastic-looking girl, felt really strange. For the first time in months I wasn't some sort of freak. I was just a young guy getting to know a girl, like people do. I forgot my tatty clothes and matted hair and the ache in my gut. I forgot about cold, hard doorways and cold, hard eyes and the fact that I couldn't even invite her to see a movie. I was a guy, she was a girl and I might be falling in love. That was all I knew. All I wanted to know. I didn't even notice we'd left the caff till I found myself sitting on a wall in weak sunshine, holding her

at us like we were committing a crime or something. It was the start of a brilliant time for me, and all I can say is it's a good job we can't see into the future.

So we're sitting on this wall and she says, 'Let's get chips and eat them by the water.' It's a warm day for February at that, but there's one snag. 'I got no dosh,' I tell her.

'I have.'

'Yeah, but it's gotta last. It's slim pickings, tapping.'

'I got plenty,' she says.

'You won't have for long if you broadcast it like that.' I grin. 'How d'you know I won't mug you for it?'

'Try it,' she says. 'You'll mebbe get something you didn't bargain for.'

She bought chips and we sat by the water. I said, 'What you dossing for if you got dosh — you could get a place.'

She shrugged. 'Like you said, it's gotta last. And anyway, I'm with you now. I don't need a place.'

This sounded reasonable as well as flattering and I accepted it. I should've pushed a bit harder but I was well in love by this time and you don't, do you?

ous about what she called The Scene – she meant life on the street. She asked about a million questions and I did my best to answer them. I had no choice, since I'd passed myself off to her as an old hand. To be perfectly honest I was beginning to regret having lied – not because of the questions, but because of love, I suppose – which is ironic considering what happened later, but this was now.

I didn't tap at all that day. Neither of us did. We strolled through the market, looking at the costly junk and the punters who were buying it. We got Cokes and even ate again, though my wizened gut wasn't hungry. I don't believe I thought of Ginger once, except when I was telling her about him, which is rotten, but shows what love will do. And so the day slipped by.

I'd told her about Captain Hook, and when it got dark I thought of suggesting a night on board, but I didn't. For one thing it'd have seemed cheeky when it was her dosh, and for another I didn't want us to spend our first night in a reeking crowd. I wanted Gail to myself, so I took her to a favourite doorway of mine where we bedded down for the night.

Nothing happened. Sorry to disappoint, but it's true. I don't know why. Malnutrition perhaps, or stepfathers. All we seemed to want was

that's what we did. But if you think that must've been dead boring, you're wrong.

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Sunday she wanted to try her hand at tapping so we rode down to Charing Cross. I remembered how Ginger had started me off – leaving me by the National Gallery while he did Trafalgar Square, and we did the same. I didn't want to leave her, even though we'd be practically in sight of each other. It was a cold morning but dry, and there were quite a lot of people about. As I made the round of benches, a little video kept playing itself inside my head. I was the star. The opening scene showed me going across to collect Gail in a couple of hours' time and finding she's vanished. After that came a succession of shots of me in various stressful situations. Running through unfamiliar streets, calling her name. Trying to interest the police who don't want to know. Waiting on Camden Station forever. I tried to suppress this video, reminding myself that it was Gail who'd wanted us to stick together, so she was hardly likely to do a runner the minute my back was turned, but it was no use. I guess I was still haunted by the way Ginger had dropped out of my life. Anyway, I didn't stick it long. The pigeons were doing

of bread and handfuls of corn while I got sweet FA. I swear if I ever come to London again I'll come as a pigeon. I did about half an hour then started making my way back, tapping all the way.

She wasn't there. Not on the steps, not on the pavement. Panic squeezed my heart. I ran up the steps and looked all round, then set off along the front of the Gallery. I'd just turned into St Martin's Place when I saw her coming out of a phone box. My relief was so overwhelming that it was some time before it occurred to me to wonder whom she'd been calling. When I asked she said, 'My sister in Glasgow. She made me promise to keep in touch.'

It sounded totally feasible. I nodded. 'I've got a sister. Carole. I don't phone though - clean break, y'know?'

'Hmm.' She nodded. 'I promised.'

'Oh, I'm not getting at you. I only —'

'I know.' She squeezed my hand.

I grinned, squeezing hers. 'How much did you make?'

She shrugged. 'Dunno. Never counted. Hang on.' She dug in her pockets, produced a double handful of change and counted it. 'Two pounds thirty.' She pocketed the coins. 'How about you?'

supposed to be the expert.'

'Beginner's luck,' she smiled. 'Or maybe it's because I'm a woman.' She gazed at me. 'Anyway, we share, don't we - everything?'

And from then on we did, and it was all so fantastic that time just flew. I practically stopped noticing the cold. When something happened to jerk me back into the real world, it was spring.

Daily Routine Orders 13

You mustn't think I've been idle, just because Link the Stink continues to evade me. A peek under the famous floorboards is all you'd need to convince you of my continuing determination to rid my country of the riff-raff that's dragging it down.

My tally of recruits now stands at seven. Seven! Oh, I know I went on a bit when we reached three and three *is* a significant number, but seven – seven's what you call a mystical number, the reason being one that need not detain us. All I know is, lots of things go in sevens, like the seven deadly sins and the seventh son of a seventh son, not to mention the days of the week and *The Magnificent Seven*.

I got a black one, which goes to show there's no racial discrimination in the Camden Horizontals. It also helps break up the pattern – the deadly pattern I mentioned earlier. You can just imagine it, can't you – some smart-ass Detective Constable looking for a pattern, saying, all his victims have been white – *that* could be significant. Well it ain't, so there! There is no pattern, except that each operation has been a textbook example of brilliance, and they'll never see that.

They've bags of swank, my lads. Shiny boots and nice short hair. And if you think the boots'll give me away – if you're thinking the fella I get 'em off must

fella, I go to three. So far. And there'll be more yet, by golly there will. You don't catch old Shelter that easily.

So the business continues. Volunteers swell the ranks. And they *are* volunteers, you know – nobody forces 'em to come. They come for what recruits have always come for – an end to hunger and a roof over their heads, and they get it. None of my lads is hungry, and they've got a roof over their heads and a floor as well. I sometimes think I spoil 'em.

Where was I? Oh, yes
– spring, and the real world.

It was magic being with Gail. Like I said, I seemed to stop noticing the cold, and tapping became a sort of game for us – a contest to see who could score most. It wasn't heavy – I don't mean that. It was a light-hearted game – I never minded when Gail won, which she often did.

Mind you, the situation had its drawbacks. For a start I got jealous of Gail. Possessive, I suppose. I hated letting her out of my sight. She was so good-looking I was terrified some guy'd come along – someone with a job and a car and a place to live, maybe – and snatch her away. Well – it'd be no contest would it? And that was the other drawback. I started wanting work so I could offer her a home. I'd always wanted a job of course, but now it became a longing – almost an obsession. Worst thing was, I knew it

me a chance the way I looked now – but it didn't stop me wanting, or trying. I really did try, too. I haunted the Job Centre, wrote letters on nicked paper, bought stamps I couldn't afford – I even had a couple of interviews but I never got a result. They know, you see. If you have to give some job club as a return address, they know you've nowhere to live. They know you haven't worked in a long time – maybe never, and they don't want to know. They've so many applicants to choose from, why should they take on a dossier? I wouldn't, if I was in their shoes.

It was torture too, because every time I went chasing after a prospect it meant leaving her behind, and all the time I was gone I'd be worrying. Maybe that's one reason I never got anything – they could tell I hadn't brought my brain with me. Anyway, April came along and my situation hadn't changed and Gail was still with me, which astonished me when I allowed myself to think about it. She didn't seem to mind that I had nothing to offer. I put it down to love.

One Saturday – it was a warm, sunny day – we were sitting on the tow-path opposite Pullit, the local night-spot, enjoying the sunshine, when a middle-aged guy came up to us. 'Excuse me,'

thought he must be lost or something, but then he said, 'I'm trying to trace my daughter, and I wondered if you might have seen her. Her name's Tanya. This is her.' He held out a snapshot. Gail took it, shook her head and passed it to me. It was Toya. I nodded. 'I've seen her a couple of times.'

'Where?' The guy practically jumped down my throat. 'Where'd you see her? When?'

I nodded towards the Lock. 'There. The market. Not for a while, though.'

'Did you talk to her? Did she say where she was living or anything like that?'

I shook my head. 'She was dossing, I think. I don't know where she hangs out.'

'Was she with anyone - an older man, perhaps?'

'No. Once she was with two young guys, the other time she was alone.' I looked at him. 'Why would she be with an older man?'

He shook his head. When he spoke I could tell he was trying to keep from crying. 'I don't know. I spoke to a man last night - a man in a watchman's hut. He told me he might have seen my daughter about a week ago, going into the ground floor flat of the house he lives in, with the man who has the flat. A man in his forties.'

'Did he give you the address? Have you tried

Hook. He nodded. 'I went there last night. I rang the bell but there was nobody in.'

'The guy in the watchman's hut - does he know this man?'

'No. He's not been there long, apparently.'

'Have you tried the police?'

'No. I tried them months ago - when Tanya left home. They didn't want to know. She's seventeen, you see - free to go where she chooses.' He stifled a sob. 'It's breaking her mother's heart.'

Poor sods, I thought. They drive their kid out, probably without meaning to, then think tramping round London with a snapshot'll get her back. It won't, but I wish someone cared about me like that.

'Look,' I said. 'We'll look out for your daughter, and if we see her we'll say we saw you - get her to phone home, okay?'

He was so grateful he practically hugged me. 'Bless you,' he says, shoving a fiver in my unresisting hand. 'Bless you both.'

He shambled off, clutching his snapshot and his useless hope. Gail and I watched him go, each pretending not to notice how close the other was to tears.

Daily Routine Orders 14

Fella rang my bell last night. 22.00 hours. I wasn't worried. Provided you've got the situation under control there's nothing to worry about. A swift recce through the curtain showed me a shortish chap of about forty-five. It was too dark for me to see his features, but something about the way he was standing told me he was agitated so I judged it best not to reveal my position. I never show a strong light after dusk. My table lamp has a sixty-watt bulb and from outside, with the curtains drawn, no illumination is visible. I know this because I've checked. Always check everything, that's my golden rule. So I lay low and waited. He tried twice more, then left. I don't know who he was or what he wanted, but instinct warns me he could be related to one of my recruits. I might be wrong, but my instincts are usually pretty sharp so I'll exercise particular care over the next day or so.

By golly I will.

We'd probably have thought no more about it if it hadn't been for Nick. I mean, Captain Hook might easily have been mistaken, and people move on all the time. I'd have forgotten Toya even quicker than I forgot Ginger if we hadn't run into Nick that same afternoon, and who knows what might have happened then?

Nick's the guy who sells the *Big Issue* on Camden Station, but we came across him under the bridge on the High Street. I'd just tapped a Yank for a quid when he came up to me. 'I'm glad I saw you,' he said. 'Something funny's just happened.'

'Don't tell me,' I said. 'The Prime Minister's offered you a kip at Number Ten, right?'

'No, listen. You know when you were looking for that mate of yours a while back?'

'Ginger. Yeah?'