

August 1963 2/6

TOWN

THE MILLION
CARAT
COLOSSUS

The
Deighton
Dossier



A DAY IN THE LIFE OF LEN DEIGHTON

AM

9.55 In an ugly little neo-Georgian flat near the Elephant and Castle the phone is ringing imperiously, but all is quiet for it has a whole packet of rayon blended household cotton wool screwed under its baseplate.

10.12 In response to continuous bell ringing, the door is opened by round faced man in a moth-eaten dressing-gown. If he were in slightly better condition Len Deighton could be called pudgy. As it is he is undeniably fat. He shows me into the front room. It is dark in spite of the whitewashed walls, on one side of the room is a large black welsh dresser crowded with chipped antique porcelain. There is a severely wounded chesterfield, a stuffed warthog, a tea trolley laden with tubes of paint, brushes and jugs of dirty water and a Thonet rocking-chair in which three overfed cats jockey for position.

10.18 I have heard the roar of the electric coffee grinder and the scream of a whistling-kettle and now the heavy aroma of rich coffee percolates through the flat. From the bathroom there is a steady thunder of the shower.

10.30 Len Deighton has emerged with two bowls of coffee. He has cut his chin shaving and there are specks of blood on the collar of the blue shirt with epaulettes and flap pockets. He sits down heavily and stirs his coffee in a distracted sort of way.

10.40 LD has finished his coffee. He phones his secretary who works in a different part of London. 'I also have an office in Russell Square,' he says 'but I've never sat down in it.'

'Why?' I ask.

'Because there are no chairs there,' he says, and gives a nervous giggle. He speaks to his secretary and dictates three letters over the phone. One is a complaint to BEA, who feel that they are not responsible for an hotel bill when they left LD stranded in Vienna with no planes flying. One is to *The Times Literary Supplement*, which has just published an article about *The Ipcress File* and the last one is to his literary agent about two new clauses in a contract for Finnish translation.

10.55 He runs thick fingers through his moth-eaten hair-cut and walks across the

room. 'Like those?' he asks. He is pointing to two icons that hang above the fireplace.

'Yes,' I say doubtfully.

'Made 'em out of balsa wood and paste' - as though he expected to surprise me.

11.10 The phone rings (LD has switched the extension bell on). It is the *Observer*. LD has a horror of answering telephones so his beautiful wife generally cases each caller. LD takes the phone. The *Observer* want to know whether he can locate an anarchist for a lecture at a provincial university. He suggests a couple of cafés they can try. Capping the phone, he says to me 'Not so many anarchists about lately.' I nod. 'Used to be a lot about at one time,' he says. 'Really?' I say. LD replaces the receiver and walks across the room. He picks up a small prickly ball and throws it to me.

'Sniff that,' he says. I look at it. It is an orange stuck with so many cloves that you can't see the peel. I sniff it. 'Great, eh?' LD says. 'Yes,' I say.

11.30 LD goes into the kitchen. In front of him is a rough pencil draft of his cooking-strip for the *Observer*.

'This is *boeuf bourguignon*,' he says. He is cutting up meat and carrots and

hurling them into a frying-pan where butter is dissolving. 'Leg of beef is best,' says LD. 'It needs long cooking but the flavour is there.' He takes the pencilled draft and crosses the word 'brown' through. He writes 'sear' in its place. 'Sear cubes of 2 lb leg of Beef' the recipe now says.

'Did you work your way through all the recipes in *Action Cook-book*?' I asked him.

'Have you read *Action Cook-book*?' he said in a faintly surprised way.

'Cape's sent me a review copy,' I said. 'You'd better not use it' LD said, 'the recipes in the review copies have got deliberate mistakes.' LD laughed a great deal as he said this, and the end of his tie went into the saucepan. The kitchen is about the size of a gigantic telephone box. Across one wall is a row of tarnished copper pans and under it a shelf where balls of string, pistachios, coffee, brandy, tinfoil and a dented red tin that says 'A Coronation souvenir June 1953' a picture of Balmoral Castle on it. By now there are four gravy spots down the front of the shirt. I point this out to him. He fingers the material proudly and says, 'Netherlands Air Force: 8s 6d.'

'Yes,' I say.



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PM

11.50 He works with care but with speed, chopping onion, finely shredding a clove of garlic with cross-cuts and adding half a bottle of Beaujolais before putting the casserole in the oven. I ask him if he simplifies the recipes. 'Never,' he says. 'There's no room for invention in French cooking - nor in

to about five drafts. Oh, I know they're still a mess of confusion even then, but by the fifth draft it's *my* sort of confusion. I slice sentences and paragraphs out and stick them back in different places, using Copydex - wonderful stuff.'

The tape-recorder is playing back a



writing. Compare authentic sources, analyse, test then write it down.' He turns toward the tiny room next door. 'This is the workroom,' he says over his shoulder. He sits down behind a 6 ft table and flips a switch on the huge grey tape-recorder. Behind him the bright sun shines on the stony garden. *It is midday.*

This is a small room painted white, as are all the rooms. There is a large bookcase holding about 250 cookery books, a 19 in tv, hi-fi fm radio and tape-recorder with a pair of Army earphones leading from it. On the chest of drawers there is a large statuette of a Chinese horse and rider and a tall Chinese vase. Across the desk is a profusion of clutter; a stapler, an embosser, boxes of paper-clips, white paint, indian ink, and a bottle of Copydex.

'I couldn't write books without Copydex,' LD says. 'I always take each book

talk about a trip to the Black Sea from the Third programme. LD listens as he opens the morning mail. I ask him if it's not a little late to open the mail. 'No,' he says, 'I always rate it the bottom priority. Sometimes it is two or three days before I get through them and always ten days before they are answered.' As he reads the letters he puts them into three piles; one is to be paid, one is to be answered and the third is gently dropped into a waste basket already overflowing with old newspapers, *Radio Times* and assorted rubbish.

12.25 The talk on the Third is finished. LD has made notes in one of his dozens of notebooks. 'I'll erase that now,' he says. 'I use the tape-machine as a way to defy time. That talk was given at a time when I was busy on something else. By taping it I can hear it when it's convenient. I have a time switch so

that I can have the whole thing switched on and record something even when I am out.'

12.45 'You hungry?' LD asks. 'Yes' I say, 'I like *boeuf bourguignon* very much.'

'The hell with that,' he says, 'it won't be ready. I've got a business lunch.' By 1.0 pm we are driving over Westminster Bridge in a battered 1956 vw. A disembodied voice suddenly says 'Blue seven-eight do you read me?'

'It's Aircall,' said Len Deighton.

'Oh yes,' I said.

'Radio phone,' he says. 'The most efficient and pleasant organisation I have ever had dealings with.' He presses the transmit button and replies to the call with lots of 'roger' and 'wilco' and 'over' and 'out'. It is a man on the phone who wants to meet him at three o'clock the following afternoon. Len Deighton suggests a café in Soho which apparently is agreeable to the caller. In Soho we park in a car-park run by a man named Paddy, who Len Deighton says is one of the nicest people he knows. He says this to me three times.

1.15 The Trattoria Terrazza is crowded but our table downstairs is reserved. LD seems to know everyone there including all the waiters who bring him a Campari soda without asking what he wants. There are a lot of people around the table. A thin, bearded, conspiratorial-looking man in an ankle-length overcoat is Jonathan Clowes, LD's literary agent. Next to him is Tom Maschler, *enfant terrible* of Jonathan Cape's, who publish both Len Deighton and James Bond, and on the far side a partner from Callis Felton, LD's chartered accountants. Coming and going are LD's lawyers and his Press agent. The talk is mostly about contracts and words like 'reversion' and 'assignments' are sprinkled liberally across the table.

Although it's all done with much laughter and backchat one has the impression that they all know exactly what they are doing. For the first time one begins to wonder whether LD's disorganised ingenuity isn't the wrapping around an incisive mind.

'I like the red end-papers on *Horse*' LD says to Tom Maschler, 'and with Ray's



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dust-jacket it's going to look even better than *Ipcress*.'

The next thriller is called *Horse Under Water* and this is abbreviated to *Horse* among this group. Its success is an important part of their future plans.

2.30 The lunch is eaten and the management has offered us a brandy on the house. LD has drunk very little during the lunch and now he gives us all a little lecture about drinking and driving. We all nod sagely and drink our brandy since everyone else has come by cab.

3.0 Next to the jellied eel stall in Cambridge Circus LD is searching through a mass of old battered books spread across a stall upon which there are old decanters, postcards of Marie Lloyd and moustache cups. He finds two books he likes and buys them. An old friend of mine runs this stall. He saves me books on military history.'

4.30 We are back at LD's flat, having called into the Imperial War Museum en route to make a sketch of a photograph of a type XXI U-boat. He goes into the workroom and sorts through a pile of newly arrived magazines. There is *What's On*, *Soldier*, *RAF Review*, *Admiralty News Summary*, *British Model Soldiers Society Bulletin* and *China Reconstructs*. 'I should take the *Daily Worker*, really,' he says.

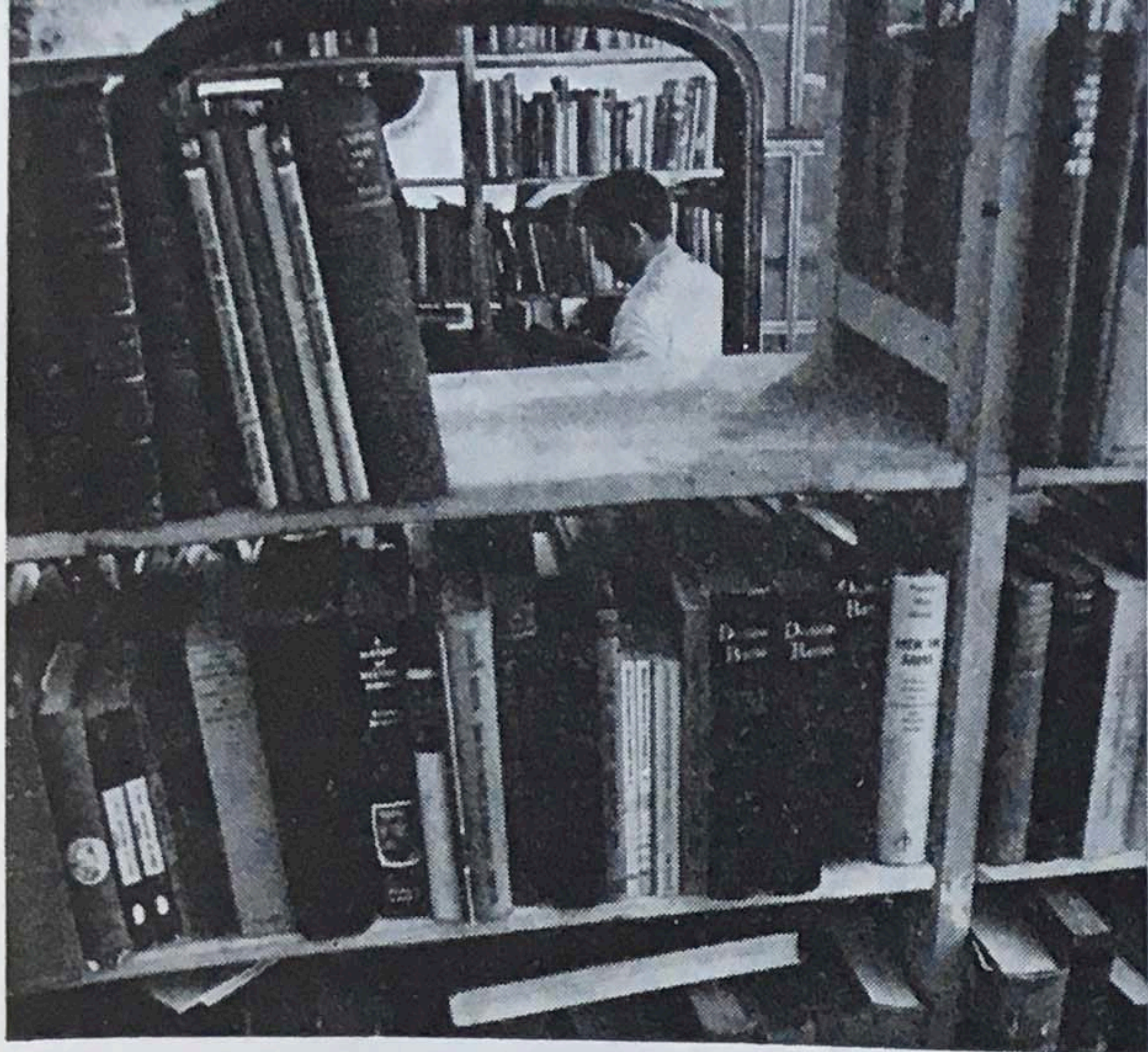
'Why?' I ask.

'Because if you write spy books you are writing about politics – you've got to spend a little time reading everyone's point of view. If I write dialogue spoken by a Communist it must be real, accurate and convincing, not a crude parody of mustachioed villainy. We are all far beyond that now. I hope we are anyway.'

4.45 LD has explained how the next section of the book he is writing depends upon a certain amount of ww2 research. 'This character is a very old man, a Nazi general. . . .'

'You always seem to have Nazi generals in your books,' I say.

LD grins. 'That's a bit unfair. But I do use the characters as symbols, I know. But once I have chosen them I try to make them as realistic as possible. I don't



AM

make them *speak* or *act* as symbols but the initial choice is symbolic.

Anyway, I have this old guy who is a Nazi general. I'll need some research.' We go into the next room. Dominating it is a big brass double bed. Under the bed there are box after box of newspaper clippings filed under names like 'Travel', 'Transport' and 'Crime'. A lot of the cuttings consist only of photographs. 'A lot of my reference is just visual,' he says.

I admire the brass bed. 'My uncle Wal has a junk shop at Clapham Junction,' he says. 'He gets us things.'

The far end of the bedroom is a mass of bookshelves and potted plants. 'Wonderful plants,' I say.

'My wife drew them for the *Sunday Times* colour supplement, but don't tell the *Observer*.'

'No,' I say.

'We finally got so used to having them here - my wife works very slowly - that we paid for them and kept them.' He dives head first into this great long-barrow of printed paper and for two hours he quietly makes notes in tiny, neurotic handwriting. He shows me the notes he has prepared for a book on military history. 'Seven years' work there,' he says, 'perhaps half a million words.'

7.30 From the kitchen there is the steady tinkle of work as Mrs Deighton, who has supplied large cups of strong coffee all day, prepares the evening meal. I ask how much cooking LD does. 'It varies,' he says. 'We don't have any system.' I quite believe it.

8.0 Guests begin to arrive. 'There will be a crowd,' LD says. I can quite believe that, too, for he has asked to supper almost everyone we have met all day. In the living-room there is a big coal fire and the guests help themselves to a drink. LD acts rather like one of the guests; he makes no attempt to take anyone's coat or pour them a drink, but it all seems to work out very well, since the visitors know where everything is.

8.15 The guests are still arriving, but LD is sitting in the workroom behind his electric typewriter. One of the guests - an advertising man - puts his head

round the door. 'Are you working or watching *No Hiding Place*?' he asks. The TV set has been operating since *Tonight* came on the air.

LD says, 'Both, and what's more I'm recording a string quartet at the same time.' I look toward the tape-recorder and find he is doing exactly that.

8.45 We are sitting round two ramshackle card-tables being served with a clear beef soup, roast beef broccoli, a vast cheese board, fresh peach and brandy soufflé with brandy and cigars to finish.

11.30 The conversation is about narcotic-taking. LD says its like pulling the bedclothes over your head and refusing to get up.

'Don't you ever pull the bedclothes over your head and refuse to get up?' someone asks him.

'Nearly all the time,' he says with a giggle.

The conversation is about advertising, food, travel and art, in which most of the fourteen people there are well versed. There is surprisingly little talk about houses or motor cars. As most of the guests have to go to work by next morning, they have all left by 2.10 am. LD goes back into the workroom and shifts a very fat tortoiseshell cat out of his chair in order to sit down at the

typewriter. He flips the switch on the tape-recorder and the sound of a Brahms string quartet floats gently across the room. LD reads through the stuff he has written that day. He takes a pair of wallpaper scissors and snips it to pieces then begins to build it together again with Copydex.

'Great stuff, Copydex,' he says.

'Yes,' I say. Outside the milk lorries roar past, chinking and clattering over the uneven roadway.

3.0 He phones Aircall (his car phone service) and asks if there are any messages. The operator says that there is a man who wants to sell him some information about confidence tricks, and will be in Central London tomorrow. He'll phone in at midday. LD says OK and hangs up. 'For some reason the people who want to sell you stories never have much to say - it's the ones who are prepared to tell you for nothing that really make your hair curl. I'm doing a screenplay about confidence men you see. Weird mob.'

3.15 LD wanders into the hall and picks up a yoghurt from the floor. He opens the cap and eats it with a tiny spoon. 'I think I'll go to bed now,' he says. 'Have you got all the copy you need?' 'Yes, thanks,' I say.

