

The Spy-Catcher who missed Mrs. Maclean

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THE SPY-CATCHER WHO MISSED MRS. MACLEAN.

by DEREK MEAKIN.

What a fuss there has been in the British Press about the disappearance of Mrs. Melinda Maclean, wife of the missing diplomat, from her Geneva flat.

As soon as the news reached Fleet Street, foreign editors of the big dailies took immediate steps to turn the story into one of the most sensational mysteries of the year. Reporters were hurried off to Geneva, and one paper went as far as to send over a private plane to help in the search.

Even though they failed to find Mrs. Maclean (and no-one really expected them to) there was no shortage of copy to phone back to London, and in the absence of pictures showing Mrs. Maclean actually crossing the Iron Curtain their lengthy stories were illustrated by poses of the garage attendant who accepted the Maclean car, the railway porter who carried the family's baggage, and the post office clerk who handled the famous "Don't worry" telegram, — itself reproduced in most of the British papers.

But it was the Daily Express which beat the band. Nine days after the hue and cry started science reporter Chapman Pincher was given splash headlines for a story linking Mrs. Maclean's disappearance with — of all things — the atom bomb!

He contended that Melinda's vanishing act could be "part of a long-sustained drive to prevent the atomic partnership between Britain and America, thereby forcing both countries to squander their resources in duplicating costly experiments".

Such a "plot to split the West" had greatly disturbed Britain's defence chiefs, claimed Pincher.

Naturally his story was never confirmed — but at least it helped to keep the mystery in the public eye!

Up to a point all the stories made entertaining reading, but I began to find them rather distasteful when some of the papers started throwing mud at both the British and Swiss authorities for letting Mrs. Maclean slip away without leaving a trace.

What annoyed me more than anything else was to find that the man who was having to bear the brunt of all the criticism was Mr. Charles Knecht, the cantonal police chief of Geneva.

This is grossly unfair as Knecht was not responsible for keeping Mrs. Maclean under observation any more than he had to watch any of the hundreds of other Britons now living in Geneva.

And it is absolutely unwarranted as Charles Knecht is not only administrative head of his regional police, but is also well-known as a top counter-espionage expert.

One of the biggest *coups* he ever pulled off was towards the end of the war when he was instrumental in breaking up the extensive Soviet spy network operating in Switzerland.

His first move was to silence two short-wave radio transmitters which were beaming intelligence reports from Geneva to Moscow. And he located them by switching off the electrical current from houses in the

area where they were known to be operating, one by one, until the police listening posts reported that the sets had gone off the air. There was a lightning raid and the operators were arrested.

As in the Maclean affair the trail then ran from Geneva to Lausanne. A fast police car took him along the coastal road skirting the northern shore of the Lake of Geneva which separates the two cities. A hurried conference with local police. Another raid. And the leader of the Soviet spy ring in Switzerland, a Liverpool-born British citizen named Foote, was caught right in the act of communicating with the headquarters of the Soviet espionage service.

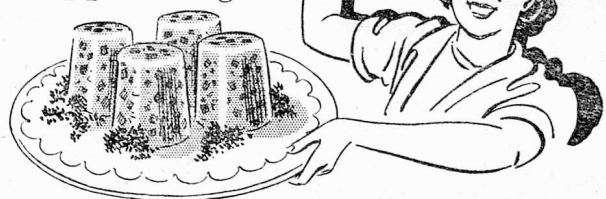
More important than the arrest of the ringleaders, perhaps, was the discovery of codes and other documents, which soon yielded their secrets to Swiss cryptographers, and the interception of more messages even months after the arrests had been made.

Copies of all these documents were made available to the British and American intelligence services, who were startled to learn through them of the existence of a powerful Russian spy network based on Ottawa, which had been in close contact with the Swiss organisation.

This was the first hint the allies had of the activities of the Soviet spy ring in North America, the whole ramifications of which were not brought to light until their fears were confirmed by the dramatic disclosures of Igor Gouzenko.

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