

No Comebacks

by Frederick Forsyth, 1938–

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MARK SANDERSON LIKED WOMEN. For that matter he also liked Aberdeen Angus fillet steaks, medium rare with tossed heart-of-lettuce salad, and he consumed both with equal if passing enjoyment. If he ever felt a little peckish, he rang up the appropriate supplier and ordered what he needed to be sent round to his penthouse. He could afford it, for he was a millionaire several times over, and that was in pounds sterling, which even in these troubled times are each worth about two US dollars.

Like most rich and successful men, he had three lives: his public and professional life as the golden-boy tycoon of the City of London; his private life, which is not necessarily what it means, for some men like to lead a private life in a glare of publicity; and his secret life.

The first was regularly chronicled in the financial columns of the major newspapers and TV programmes. In the mid-sixties he had started work for a real-estate agent in the West End of London with little formal education but a brain

like a razor for a lucrative property deal. Within two years he had learned the rules of the game and, more importantly, how to break them legally. At the age of twenty-three he clinched his first solo deal, a mere £10,000 profit inside twenty-four hours for a residential property in St John's Wood, and founded Hamilton Holdings which remained sixteen years later the pivot of his wealth. He named it after the first deal he clinched, for the house had been in Hamilton Terrace. It was the last sentimental thing he ever did. By the early seventies he was out of residential property with his first million pounds and into office-block development. By the mid-seventies he was worth close to £5 million and began to diversify. His Midas touch was as shrewd in finance, banking, chemicals and Mediterranean holiday resorts as it had been in St John's Wood. City editors reported it, people believed it and the shares of the ten-division conglomerate grouped under Hamilton Holdings rose steadily.

His private life could be found in the same newspapers a few pages earlier. A man with a Regent's Park penthouse, Elizabethan manor in Worcestershire, chateau in the Loire valley, villa at Cap d'Antibes, yacht, Lamborghini, Rolls Royce, and a seemingly endless succession of young and athletic starlets photographed in his company or envisaged in his four-metre circular bed, tends to have a compulsive fascination for the scribes of the William Hickey column. A mention in dispatches at the divorce hearing of a million-dollar film actress and a paternity suit from a dusky Miss World contender would have ruined him fifty years ago, but at the turn of this decade it merely proved, if proof were needed and nowadays apparently often is, that he could do it, which among the 'In' people of the West End of London is sufficiently remarkable to excite admiration. He was a much chronicled man.

His secret life was something else again, and could be summed up in one word—boredom. Mark Sanderson was bored out of his mind with the whole shooting match. The quip he had once coined—'Whatever Mark wants Mark gets'—had become a sour joke. At thirty-nine he was not bad-looking in a glowering, Brando sort of way, physically fit and lonely. He was aware he wanted someone, not hundreds of them, just someone, and children by her and a place in the country called home. He also knew he was extremely unlikely to find her, for he had a fan-idea of what he wanted and he had not met one in a decade. Like most rich philanderers, he would only be impressed by a woman who quite genuinely was not impressed by him, or at least the public him, the him of money and power and reputation. Unlike most rich philanderers he still retained enough capacity for self-analysis to admit this, at least to himself. To do so publicly would mean death by ridicule.

He was quite certain he would never meet her, when in the early summer he did. It was at a party in aid of some charity, the sort of thing where a boring time is had by all and the tiny balance left from the ticket money is sent to provide a bowl of milk in Bangladesh. She was across the room listening to a small fat man with a large cigar to compensate. She was listening with a calm half-smile that gave no indication whether she found the anecdote amusing, or the antics of the short man, who was trying to get an eyeful of her cleavage.

Sanderson drifted across and on the strength of a nodding acquaintance with the short film producer had himself introduced. Her name was Angela Summers, and the hand that took his was cool and long, with perfect nails. The other, holding what looked like a gin and tonic but turned out to be just tonic, bore a slim brand of gold on the third finger. Sanderson could not have cared less; married women were as easy as any others. He ousted the film producer and guided her elsewhere to talk. Physically she impressed him, which was unusual, and excited him, which was not.

Mrs Summers was tall and straight-backed, with a calm and handsome if not fashionably beautiful face. Her figure certainly was unfashionable in the lath-thin eighties—deep-bosomed, small-waisted, with wide hips and long legs. Her gleaming chestnut hair was coiled behind her head, and seemed to be healthy rather than expensive. She wore a simple white dress which improved a medium-gold suntan, no jewellery and only a touch of make-up round the eyes, which alone set her off from the other socialite women in the room. He put her age at thirty, and later learned it was thirty-two.

He assumed the suntan came from the usual winter skiing holiday extended into April or from a spring Caribbean cruise, meaning she or her husband had to have the money to live that way, which the other women in the room also had. He was wrong on both counts. He learned that she and her husband lived in a chalet on the coast of Spain on the basis of her husband's tiny earnings from books about birds and her own from teaching English.

For a moment he thought the dark hair and eyes, the carriage and the golden skin might mean she was Spanish by birth, but she was as English as he was. She told him she had come to visit her parents in the Midlands and a former school friend had suggested she spend a week in London before returning. She was easy to talk to. She didn't flatter him, which suited his mood, nor did she burst into peals of laughter if he said something mildly amusing.

'What do you think of our West End society?' he asked as they stood with backs to the wall watching the party.

'Probably not what I'm supposed to,' she replied thoughtfully.

'They're like a lot of parakeets in a jamjar,' he muttered savagely.

She raised an eyebrow. 'I thought Mark Sanderson was one of the pillars of it.' She was teasing him, quite gently but firmly.

'Do our doings penetrate down to Spain?' he asked.

'Even on the Costa Blanca we can get the *Daily Express*,' she answered deadpan.

'Including the life and times of Mark Sanderson?'

'Even those,' she said quietly.

'Are you impressed?'

'Should I be?'

'No.'

'Then I'm not.'

Her reply caused him a sense of relief. 'I'm glad,' he said, 'but may I ask why?'

She thought for a few moments. 'It's really rather phoney,' she said.

'Including me?'

He was glancing down at the gentle rise and fall of her breasts under the simple white cotton when she looked round at him.

'I don't know,' she said seriously. 'I suspect that given half a chance you might be quite a nice person.'

The reply caught him off balance.

'You could be wrong,' he snapped, but she just smiled tolerantly as to a fractious small boy.

Her friends came to reclaim her a few minutes later, gushed to Sanderson and prepared to leave. On the way to the lobby he whispered a request to take her out to dinner the following night. He had not asked in that way for years. She made no arch rejoinder about the dangers of being seen out with him, assuming he would take her where there were no photographers. She considered the request for a moment, then said, 'Yes, I think I'd like that.'

He thought about her all that night, ignoring the bony and hopeful model he had found at Annabel's in the small hours, lying awake, staring at the ceiling, his mind filled with a fantasy vision of gleaming chestnut hair on the pillow beside him and soft, golden skin under his touch. He was prepared to bet she slept calmly and quietly, as she seemed to do everything else. He moved his hand across the darkness to caress the model's bosom, but found only a diet-starved puppy's ear and an exaggerated gasp of feigned arousal. He went into the kitchen and brewed coffee, drinking it in the darkened sitting room. He was still sitting there looking out over the trees of the park when the sun rose over distant Wanstead marshes.

A week is not long to have an affair, but it can be enough to change a life, or two, or even three. The next evening he called for her and she came down to the car. She wore her hair piled high on top of her head, a white ruffled blouse with leg-of-mutton sleeves ending in a froth of lace at the wrists, a wide cinch belt and black maxi-skirt. The outfit gave her an old-fashioned Edwardian air that he found exciting because it was in contrast to his own private thoughts about her of the night before.

She talked simply but with intelligence and listened well when he talked about his business, which he seldom did with women. As the evening wore on he became aware that what he already felt for her was not a passing attraction, nor even simple lust. He admired her. She had an inner calmness, a self-composure, a serenity that rested and relaxed him.

He found himself talking to her more and more freely about things he usually kept to himself—his financial affairs, his boredom with the permissive society that he at once despised and used like a bird of prey. She seemed not so much to know as to understand, which is far more important in a woman than mere knowledge. They were still talking quietly at the corner table after midnight when the restaurant wanted to close. She declined in the nicest possible way to come up to his penthouse for a nightcap, which had not happened to him in years.

By the midweek he was admitting to himself that he was smitten like a seventeen-year-old boy. He asked her what her favourite perfume was, and she told him it was Miss Dior, of which she sometimes permitted herself a quarter ounce duty free on the plane. He sent a minion to Bond Street and that evening

gave her the largest bottle in London. She accepted it with unaffected pleasure, and then immediately protested at the size of it.

'It's far too extravagant,' she told him.

He felt embarrassed. 'I wanted to give you something special,' he said.

'It must have cost a fortune,' she said severely.

'I really can afford it, you know.'

'That may be so, and it's very nice, but you mustn't go buying me things like that again. It's sheer extravagance,' she told him with finality.

He rang up his Worcestershire manor before the weekend and had the heating in the pool turned on, and on the Saturday they motored down for the day and swam, despite the chill May wind that forced him to have the sliding glass screens wheeled round three sides of the pool. She appeared from the dressing rooms in a one-piece swimsuit of white towelling and the sight of her took his breath away. She was, he told himself, a magnificent woman, in every sense.

Their last evening out was on the eve of her departure for Spain. In the darkness of the Rolls parked in a side street round the block from where she was staying they kissed for a long time, but when he tried to slip his hand down her frock she gently and firmly removed it and put it back in his lap.

He proposed to her that she leave her husband, divorce him and that they marry. Because he was evidently very serious she took the suggestion seriously, and shook her head.

'I couldn't do that,' she said.

'I love you. Not just passingly, but absolutely and completely. I'd do anything for you.'

She gazed forward through the windscreen at the darkened street. 'Yes, I think you do, Mark. We shouldn't have gone this far. I should have noticed earlier and stopped seeing you.'

'Do you love me? Even a little.'

'It's too early to say. I can't be rushed like that.'

'But could you love me? Now or ever?'

Again she had the womanly sense to take the question completely seriously.

'I think I could. Or rather, could have loved you. You're not anything like you and your reputation try to make you out to be. Underneath all the cynicism you're really rather vulnerable, and that's nice.'

'Then leave him and marry me.'

'I can't do that. I'm married to Archie and I can't leave him.'

Sanderson felt a surge of anger at the faceless man in Spain who stood in his way. 'What's he got that I can't offer you?'

She smiled a trifle ruefully. 'Oh, nothing. He's really rather weak, and not very effectual...'

'Then why not leave him?'

'Because he needs me,' she said simply.

'I need you.'

She shook her head. 'No, not really. You want me, but you can get by without me. He can't. He just hasn't the strength.'

'It's not just that I want you, Angela. I love you, more than anything else that's ever happened to me. I adore you, and I desire you.'

'You don't understand,' she said after a pause. 'Women love to be loved and adore to be adored. They desire to be desired, but more than all these together a woman needs to be needed. And Archie needs me, like the air he breathes.'

Sanderson ground his Sobranie into the ashtray.

'So, with him you stay... *until death us do part*,' he grated.

She didn't rise to the mockery but nodded and turned to stare at him. 'Yes, that's about it. Till death us do part. I'm sorry, Mark, but that's the way I am. In another time and another place, and if I weren't married to Archie, it might have been different, probably would. But I am married to my husband, and that's the end of it.'

The following day she was gone. He had his chauffeur drive her to the airport to catch the Valencia plane.

There are very fine gradations between love and need and desire and lust, and any one can turn into an obsession in a man's mind. In Mark Sanderson's all four did, and the obsession grew with the mounting loneliness as May turned into June. He had never been baulked in anything before, and like most men of power had developed over a decade into a moral cripple. For him there were logical and precise steps from desire to determination, to conception, to planning, to execution. And they inevitably ended in acquisition. In early June he decided to acquire Angela Summers, and the phrase that ran incessantly through his mind when he studied the stage of conception of the method was from the Book of Common Prayer.

Till death us do part. Had she been a different woman, impressed by wealth, luxury, power, social standing, there would have been no problem. For one thing he could have dazzled her with wealth to get her; for another she would have been a different woman and he would not have been so obsessed by her. But he was going round in a circle, and the circle would lead to madness, and there was only one way to break it.

He rented a small flat in the name of Michael Johnson, contacting the letting agents by telephone and paying a month's rent and a month's deposit in cash by registered mail. Explaining he would be arriving in London in the small hours of the morning, he arranged for the key to be left under the door-mat.

Using the flat as a base, he telephoned one of the no-questions-if-it's-legal private inquiry agencies in London and stated what he wanted. Hearing the client wished to remain anonymous, the bureau needed money in advance. He sent them £500 in cash by special delivery.

One week later a letter came to Mr Johnson stating the commission had been completed and the account balance was another £250. He sent it by post, and three days later received the dossier he wanted. There was a potted biography, which he skimmed through, a portrait taken from the flyleaf of a book about birds of the Mediterranean, long since out of print after selling a few score of copies, and several photos taken with a telephoto lens. They showed a small, narrow-shouldered man with a toothbrush moustache and a weak chin. Major Archibald Clarence Summers—'He would have to keep the Major,' thought Sanderson savagely—expatriate British officer living in a small villa half a mile back from the coast outside an undeveloped Spanish coastal village in Alicante province, halfway

between Alicante and Valencia. There were several shots of the villa. There was finally a rundown on the way of life of the villa, the morning coffee on the tiny patio, the wife's morning visits to the Castillo to teach English to the Contessa's three children, her inevitable afternoon's sunning and swimming on the beach between three and four while the major worked on his notes about birds of the Costa Blanca.

He started the next stage by informing the staff at his office that he would be staying at home until further notice, but that he would be in daily contact by phone. His next step was to change his appearance.

A small hairdresser advertising in *Gay News* was most helpful in this regard, cutting Sanderson's longish hair to a very 'butch' crew-cut and dyeing it from its natural dark chestnut to a pale blond. The operation took over an hour, would be good for a couple of weeks and was accompanied by much appreciative cooing from the hairdresser.

From then on Sanderson made a point of driving straight into the underground car park of his apartment block and taking the lift to the penthouse, avoiding the lobby porter. By telephone from his apartment he secured from a contact in Fleet Street the name and address of one of London's leading archive libraries specializing in contemporary affairs. It contained a superb section of works of reference and a copious collection of newspaper and magazine cuttings. After three days he had obtained a reading ticket in the name of Michael Johnson.

He began with the master heading of *Mercenaries*. This file contained subfiles and cross-indexes bearing such titles as 'Mike Hoare', 'Robert Denard', 'John Peters' and 'Jacques Schramme'. There were other subfiles on Katanga, Congo, Yemen, Nigeria/Biafra, Rhodesia and Angola. He ploughed through them all. There were news reports, magazine articles, commentaries, book reviews and interviews. Whenever a book was mentioned, he noted the name, went to the general library section, withdrew the volume and read it. These included such titles as *History of Mercenaries* by Anthony Mockler, *Congo Mercenary* by Mike Hoare and *Firepower* which dealt exclusively with Angola.

After a week a name began to emerge from this welter of snippets. The man had been in three campaigns and even the most notorious of the authors appeared to speak warily of him. He gave no interviews and there was no photograph of him on file. But he was English. Sanderson had to gamble that he was still somewhere in London.

Years earlier, when taking over a company whose main assets were in blue-chip property, Sanderson had acquired a small menu of other commercial firms which included a cigar merchant, a film-processing laboratory and a literary agency. He had never bothered to be shot of them. It was the literary agency which found the private address of the author of one of the memoirs that Sanderson had read in the library.

The man's original publisher had no reason to be suspicious and the address was the same as the one to which the slim royalty cheques had once been sent.

When the property tycoon visited the mercenary/author, on the pretext of being from the man's own publishers, he found a man long gone to seed and drink, over the hill, living on his memories. The former mercenary hoped that the visit might

herald a reprint and further royalties, and was plainly disappointed when he learned it did not. But he brightened at the mention of an introduction fee.

Sanderson, passing himself off as Mr Johnson, explained his firm had heard a certain former colleague of the ex-mercenary might be thinking of publishing his own story. They would not want another firm to get the rights. The only problem was the man's whereabouts...

When the ex-mercenary heard the name, he grunted.

'So he's going to come clean, is he?' he said. 'That surprises me.'

He was unhelpful until his sixth large whisky and the feel of a bundle of notes in his hand. He scribbled on a piece of paper and handed it to Sanderson.

'When the bastard's in town he always drinks there,' he said.

Sanderson found the place that evening, a quiet club behind Earl's Court. On the second evening his man came in. Sanderson had seen no picture of him, but there was a description in one of the mercenary memoirs, including the scar on the jaw, and the barman greeted the man by a first name which also fitted. He was rangy, wide-shouldered and looked very fit. In the mirror behind the bar Sanderson caught a glimpse of brooding eyes and a sullen mouth over the pint of beer. He followed the man home to a block of flats 400 yards away.

When he knocked on the door ten minutes after watching the light go on from the street, the mercenary was in a singlet and dark slacks. Sanderson noted that before opening up, he had killed the light in his own hallway and left himself in shadow. The light in the corridor illuminated the visitor.

'Mr Hughes?' asked Sanderson.

The man raised an eyebrow. 'Who wants to know?'

'My name is Johnson, Michael Johnson,' said Sanderson.

'Warrant card,' said Hughes peremptorily.

'Not fuzz,' said Sanderson. 'Private citizen. May I come in?'

'Who told you where to find me?' asked Hughes, ignoring the question.

Sanderson gave him the name of his informant. 'Not that he'll remember in twenty-four hours,' he added. 'He's too boozed up to remember his own name these days.'

A hint of a smile appeared at the corner of Hughes's mouth, but there was no humour in it.

'Yeah,' he said, 'that fits,' and jerked his head towards the interior. Sanderson moved past him into the living room. It was sparsely and shabbily furnished, in the manner of a thousand rented premises in that area of London. There was a table in the centre of the floor. Hughes, following behind, gestured him to sit at it.

Sanderson sat down and Hughes took a chair opposite him.

'Well?'

'I want a job done. A contract. What I believe is called a hit.'

Hughes stared at him without change of expression.

'Do you like music?' he asked at last. Sanderson was startled. He nodded.

'Let's have some music,' said Hughes. He rose and went to a portable radio standing on a table near the bed in the corner. As he switched on the set he also fumbled under the pillow. When he turned round Sanderson was staring into the muzzle of a Colt .45 automatic. He swallowed and breathed deeply. The volume of the music swelled as Hughes turned the radio up. The mercenary reached into the

bedside drawer, his eyes still on Sanderson above the muzzle. He withdrew a notepad and pencil and returned to the table. One-handed he scribbled a single word on the sheet and turned it to Sanderson. It just said: *Strip*.

Sanderson's stomach turned over. He had heard men like this could be vicious. Hughes gestured with his gun that Sanderson should move away from the table, which he did. Sanderson dropped his jacket, tie and shirt on the floor. He wore no vest. The gun gestured again, downwards; Sanderson unzipped his fly and let his trousers fall. Hughes watched without a trace of expression. Then he spoke.

'All right, get dressed,' he said. With the gun still in his hand, but pointing at the floor, he crossed the room and turned the music from the radio lower. Then he came back to the table.

'Toss me the jacket,' he said. Sanderson, with his trousers and shirt back on, laid it on the table. Hughes patted the limp jacket.

'Put in on,' he said. Sanderson did so. Then he sat down again. He felt he needed to. Hughes sat opposite him, laid his automatic on the table near his right hand and lit a French cigarette.

'What was all that about?' asked Sanderson. 'Did you think I was armed?'

Hughes shook his head slowly.

'I could see you weren't,' he said, 'but if you had been wired for sound I'd have tied the mike flex round your balls and sent the recording to your employer.'

'I see,' said Sanderson. 'No hardware, no tape-recorder, and no employer. I employ myself; sometimes others. And I'm serious. I need a job done, and I'm prepared to pay well. I'm also very discreet. I have to be.'

'Not enough for me,' said Hughes. 'Parkhurst is full of hard men who trusted punters with more mouth than sense.'

'I don't want you,' said Sanderson evenly. Hughes raised an eyebrow again. 'I don't want anybody who lives in Britain or has roots here. I live here myself; that's enough. I want a foreigner for a foreign job. I want a name. And I'm prepared to pay for that name.'

From his inside pocket he drew a wad of fifty brand-new £20 notes and laid them on the table. Hughes watched, expressionless. Sanderson split the pile in two, pushed one pile towards Hughes and carefully tore the other pile in half. He put one sheaf of twenty-five half-notes back in his pocket.

'The first five hundred is for trying,' he said, 'the second half is for succeeding. By which I mean the *name* must meet me and agree to take the job. Don't worry; it's not complex. The target is no one famous, a complete nonentity.'

Hughes eyed the £500 in front of him. He made no move to pick it up.

'I may know a man,' he said. 'Worked with me years ago. I don't know if he still works. I'd have to find out.'

'You could call him,' said Sanderson. Hughes shook his head.

'Don't like international phone lines,' he said. 'Too many are on tap. Especially in Europe these days. I'd have to go over and see him. That would cost two hundred more.'

'Agreed,' said Sanderson. 'On delivery of the name.'

'How do I know you won't cheat me?' asked Hughes.

'You don't,' said Sanderson. 'But if I did, I think you'd come after me. I really don't need that. Not for seven hundred.'

'How do you know I won't cheat you?'

'Again, I don't,' said Sanderson. 'But I'll find my hard man eventually. And I'm rich enough to pay for two contracts as opposed to one. I don't like being conned. Point of principle, you see.'

For ten seconds the two men stared at each other. Sanderson thought he might have gone too far. Then Hughes smiled again, broadly this time, with genuine appreciation. He scooped up the £500 in whole notes and the other sheaf of half-notes.

'I'll get you your name,' he said, 'and set up the rendezvous. When you've met the name and agreed the deal, you mail me the other half of the bundle, plus two hundred for expenses. Poste restante, Earl's Court post office, name of Hargreaves. Ordinary mail, well-sealed envelope. Not registered. If not within one week of the rendezvous, my mate will be alerted that you're a welsher, and he'll break off. OK?'

Sanderson nodded. 'When do I get the name?'

'In a week,' said Hughes. 'Where can I contact you?'

'You don't,' said Sanderson. 'I contact you.'

Hughes was not offended. 'Call the bar I was in tonight,' he said. 'At ten p.m.'

Sanderson made his call at the agreed hour one week later. The barman answered, and then Hughes came on the line.

'There's a café in the Rue Miollin in Paris where the kind of people you want get together,' he said. 'Be there next Monday at noon. The man will recognize you. Read that day's *Figaro*, with the headline facing towards the room. He will know you as Johnson. After that it's up to you. If you are not there on Monday he will be there at noon on Tuesday and Wednesday. After that it's blown. And take cash with you.'

'How much?' asked Sanderson.

'About five thousand pounds, to be on the safe side.'

'How do I know it won't be a straight stick-up?'

'You won't,' said the voice, 'but he won't know whether you have a bodyguard elsewhere in the bar.' There was a click and the dead phone buzzed in his hand.

He was still reading the back page of the *Figaro* at five past twelve the following Monday in the café in the Rue Miollin, seated with his back to the wall, when the chair in front of him was drawn back and a man sat down. He was one of those who had been at the bar for the past hour.

'Monsieur Johnson?'

He lowered the paper, folded it and placed it by his side. The man was tall and lanky, black-haired and -eyed, a lantern-jawed Corsican. The pair talked for thirty minutes. The Corsican gave his name only as Calvi, which was in fact the town of his birth. After twenty minutes Sanderson passed across two photographs. One was of a man's face, and on the back was typewritten: 'Major Archie Summers, Villa San Crispin, Playa Caldera, Ondara, Alicante'. The other was of a small white-painted villa with canary-yellow shutters. The Corsican nodded slowly.

'It must be between three and four in the afternoon,' said Sanderson.

The Corsican nodded. 'No problem,' he said.

They talked for a further ten minutes about money matters, and Sanderson handed over five wads of notes, £500 in each. Foreign jobs come more expensive,

the Corsican explained, and the Spanish police can be extremely inhospitable to certain kinds of tourists. Finally Sanderson rose to leave.

'How long?' he asked.

The Corsican looked up and shrugged. 'A week, two, maybe three.'

'I want to know the moment it is done, you understand?'

"Then you have to give me some way of contacting you," said the gunman. For answer the Englishman wrote a number on a slip of paper.

'In one week's time, and for three weeks after that, you can ring me between seven-thirty and eight in the morning at this number in London. Don't try to trace it, and don't fail at the job.'

The Corsican smiled thinly. 'I shall not fail, because I want the other half of the money.'

'One last thing,' said the client, 'I want not a trace left behind, nothing that links back to me. It must look like a local burglary that went wrong.'

The Corsican was still smiling. 'You have your reputation to consider, Monsieur Johnson. I have my life, or at least thirty years in Toledo Penal. There will be no traces, no comebacks.'

When the Englishman had gone Calvi left the café, checked to see he was not followed, and spent two hours on the terrace of another café in the city centre, lost in thought in the early July sunshine, his mind on the problems of his job. The contract itself presented little trouble, a straight shooting of an unsuspecting pigeon. The problem was getting the gun safely into Spain. He could take it on the train from Paris to Barcelona and risk the customs check, but if he *were* caught it would be by the Spanish police, not the French, and they have old-fashioned attitudes towards professional gunmen. Airplanes were out—thanks to international terrorism every flight out of Orly was minutely checked for firearms. He still had contacts in Spain from his old OAS days, men who preferred to live along the coast between Alicante and Valencia rather than risk returning to France, and he reckoned he could get a shooter on loan from one of them. But he decided to avoid them all, for with nothing to do in exile they were too likely to gossip.

Finally the Corsican rose, paid his bill and went shopping. He spent half an hour at the inquiry desk in the Spanish tourist office, and another ten minutes in the office of Iberia Airlines. He finished his shopping in a bookshop and stationers in the Rue de Rivoli and went back to his flat in the suburbs.

That evening he rang the Hotel Metropol, the best in Valencia, and booked two single rooms for one night only, a fortnight hence, in the name of Calvi and the name on his own passport. Over the phone he introduced himself as Calvi, and agreed to confirm the bookings in writing at once. He also booked a return air ticket from Paris to Valencia, arriving on the evening for which he had made the hotel reservation, and returning to Paris the following evening.

While the telephone call to Valencia was coming through he had already written his letter of confirmation to the hotel. It was short and to the point. It confirmed the two bookings and added that as the signatory, M. Calvi, would be travelling constantly until his arrival in Valencia, he had ordered a book on the history of Spain to be sent forward to him, care of the Hotel Metropol, from Paris, and asked the hotel to be kind enough to hold it until his arrival.

Calvi estimated that if the book were intercepted and opened the moment he inquired for it under his real name the expression on the clerk's face would indicate there was something wrong and give him time to get away. Even if he were caught, he could claim to be an innocent party doing a favour for a friend and with no suspicion of any ulterior motive in the absent Calvi's request.

With the letter signed left-handed in the name of Calvi, sealed and stamped for posting, he went to work on the book he had bought that afternoon. It was indeed a history of Spain, expensive and heavy, on fine quality paper, with plenty of photographs which gave it added weight.

He bent back the two covers and held them together with an elastic band. The intervening 400 pages he secured as a block to the edge of the kitchen table with two carpenter's clamps.

Onto his block of paper he began to work with the thin, razor-sharp scalpel acquired the same afternoon. He sliced away for almost an hour until a square, set 1,5 inches into the area of the page from each edge, had been cut out, forming a box 7 inches by 6 inches and 3 inches deep. The insides of this hollow square he daubed thickly with a tacky glue, and smoked two cigarettes while waiting for the glue to dry. When it was hard the 400 pages would never open again.

A cushion of foam rubber, cut to size, went into the hollow to replace the IV2 pounds of paper which had been cut out and which he had weighed on the kitchen scales. He dismantled the slim Browning 9-mm automatic he had acquired on a trip into Belgium two months earlier when he had used and thrown into the Albert Canal his previous gun, a Colt .38. He was a careful man, and never used the same shooter twice. The Browning had had the tip of its barrel exposed to half an inch, and the barrel's end tooled to take a silencer.

A silencer on an automatic is never truly quiet, despite the efforts of the sound-effects men in television thrillers to pretend it is. Automatics, unlike revolvers, do not have a closed breech. As the bullet leaves the barrel the automatic's jacket is forced backwards to expel the spent cartridge and inject a fresh one. That is why they are called automatics. But in that split second as the breech opens to expel the used shell, half the noise of the explosion comes out through the open breech, making a silencer on the end of the barrel only 50 per cent effective. Calvi would have preferred a revolver with its breech closed during firing, but he needed a flat gun to go into the cavity in the book.

The silencer he laid beside the parts of the Browning was the largest component, 6,5 inches long. As a professional he knew the champagne-cork-sized silencers shown on television are as much use as a hand-held fire extinguisher to put out Mount Vesuvius.

Arranged side by side on top of the rubber cushion, the five parts, including silencer and magazine, would not quite fit, so he smacked the magazine into the automatic's handle to save space. He marked out the beds of the four components with a felt-nib pen and began to cut into the foam rubber with a fresh scalpel. By midnight the parts of the gun lay peacefully in their foam beds, the long silencer vertical, parallel to the book's spine, the barrel, butt and jacket breech in three horizontal rows from top to bottom of the page.

He covered the assembly with a thin sheet of foam rubber, daubed the insides of the front and back cover with more glue and closed the book. After an hour

pressed between the floor and an upturned table, the book was a solid block that would need a knife to prise it open. He weighed it again. It was just half an ounce heavier than the original.

Finally he slid the history of Spain into an open-ended envelope of strong polythene, such as publishers of high-quality books use to protect the dust covers from dirt and scratching. It fitted snugly, and he bonded the open end of the envelope together with the blade of his switch-knife, heated over the gas stove. Should his parcel be opened, he hoped and expected the examiner would be content to assure himself through the transparent polythene that the contents were indeed a harmless book, and reseal the parcel.

He placed the book inside a large padded envelope of the kind books are sent in, sealed only by a metal clip which can be opened by simply bending the soft metal lugs through the hole in the envelope's flap. With a do-it-yourself printing set he devised a stick-on label in the name of a well-known book store, and typed the name and address of the consignee—Monsieur Alfred Calvi, Hotel Metropol, Calle de Jativa, Valencia, Espagne. With the same printing set he made up a stamp and daubed the package with the words 'LIBROS – IMPRESOS – LIVRES.'

The following morning he mailed the letter by air and the package by surface post, which meant the train and a ten-day delay.

The Iberia Caravelle drifted into Campo de Manises and touched down as the sun was setting. It was still furiously hot and the thirty passengers, mostly villa owners from Paris arriving for six weeks' vacation, grumbled at the usual baggage delays in the customs shed.

Calvi carried one medium-sized suitcase as hand baggage. It was opened and inspected carefully, then he was out of the airport building and into the open air. First he wandered over to the airport car park and was glad to see that a large area of it was screened by trees from the airport buildings. The cars stood in rows beneath the trees, waiting for their owners. He decided to return the next morning and take his transport from there. Then he took a taxi into town.

The clerk at the hotel was more than helpful. As soon as the Corsican presented himself and his passport, the desk clerk recalled the booking, the letter of confirmation written by M. Calvi, and dived into the back office to emerge with the package containing the book. The Corsican explained that unfortunately his friend Calvi would not be joining him, but that he would obviously settle both room bills when he left the following morning. He produced a letter from the absent Calvi authorizing him to take receipt of the book awaiting collection. The clerk glanced at the letter, thanked the Corsican for offering to settle both the room bills, and handed over the package.

In his room Calvi checked the padded envelope. It had been opened, the metal staples had been bent together to pass through the sealing aperture, and then bent back again. The blob of glue he had placed on one of the metal lugs was missing. But inside, the book was still untouched in its polythene wrapper, for it would have been impossible to open the polythene without tearing or distorting it.

He opened it, forced the book covers apart with the blade of his penknife and extracted the parts of the gun. These he assembled back together, screwed on the silencer and checked the shells in the magazine. They were all there — his special slugs, with half the explosive removed to cut down the noise to a low crack. Even

with half the usual power behind it, a 9-mm slug still goes straight into a human head at 10-foot range, and Calvi never fired at more than 10 feet on a job.

He locked the gun into the bottom of the wardrobe, pocketed the key and smoked a cigarette on the balcony, gazing out at the bullring in front of the hotel and thinking of the day ahead. At nine he came down, still in his dark grey suit (from one of Paris's most exclusive tailors) that passed perfectly with the staid atmosphere of the old and expensive hotel. He dined at the Terrassa del Rialto and slept at midnight. From the hotel clerk he learned there was a plane to Madrid at eight in the morning, and he had himself called at six.

The next morning he checked out at seven and took a taxi to the airport. Standing at the gate he watched a dozen cars arrive, noting the make and number of the car and the appearance of the driver. Seven cars were driven by men without passengers, in what looked like business suits. From the observation terrace of the airport building he watched the passengers stream out to the plane for Madrid, and four of the car drivers were among them. He looked at the notes on the back of an envelope in his hand, and found he had a choice of a Simca, a Mercedes, a Jaguar and a small Spanish Seat, the local version of the Fiat 600.

After the plane had taken off he went to the men's room and changed from his suit into cream jeans, pale blue sports shirt, and blue zip-fronted nylon windbreaker. The gun he wrapped in a towel and stowed in the soft airline bag he took from his suitcase. The case he checked into left-luggage deposit, confirmed his evening booking for the Paris flight and walked back to the car park.

He picked the Seat because it is the most common car in Spain and has easy door handles for the car thief. Two men drove into the car park as he waited, and when they had gone he approached the small red beetle of a car. He slipped a metal pipe from his sleeve, slid it over the door handle and jerked downwards. The lock gave with a soft crack. From inside he opened the hood and clipped a wire jumper from the positive battery terminal to the starter motor. Behind the wheel the car started at the touch of a button, and he bowled out of the car park on the road to Valencia and the new seaboard highway N332 south to Alicante.

It is 92 kilometres or 55 miles from Valencia to Ondara, through the orange-growing centres of Gandia and Oliva, and he took it easy, making the trip in two hours. The whole coast was blistering in the morning sun, a long ribbon of golden sand dotted with brown bodies and splashing swimmers. Even the heat was ominous, without a breath of wind, and along the sea horizon lay a faint and misty haze.

As he entered Ondara he passed the Hotel Palmera, where he knew the former secretary of General Raoul Salan, once head of the OAS, still lived with his memories. In the town centre he had no trouble asking the way to Playa Caldera, which he was told by helpful townspeople lay two miles out of town. He drove into the residential sprawl of villas, mainly owned by expatriates, just before noon, and began to cruise, looking for the Villa San Crispin familiar from the long-destroyed photograph. To ask directions to the beach was one thing, to ask them to the villa might stick in someone's memory.

He found the yellow shutters and the white-painted terra cotta walls just before one o'clock, checked the name marked on a tile set into the pillar by the front gate and parked the car 200 yards farther on. Walking idly, his bag slung over one

shoulder like a tourist heading for the beach, he cased the back entrance. It was easy. From farther up the earth road on which the villa stood, a small footpath led away into a plantation of orange trees behind the row of houses. From the cover of the trees he could see that only a low fence separated the red earth of the orange orchard from the garden and the unshaded patio at the back of the villa with the yellow shutters, and he could see his man pottering about the garden with a watering can. There were french windows leading from the back garden into the main ground-floor room, wide open to allow a draught to blow through, if there should be a breath of wind. He checked his watch—time for lunch, and drove back to Ondara.

He sat till three in the Bar Valencia on Calle Doctor Fleming, and had a large plate of enormous grilled prawns and two glasses of the local light white wine. Then he paid and left.

As he drove back to the Playa the rain clouds finally moved in off the sea and there was a dull rumble of thunder across the oil-smooth water, very unusual for the Costa Blanca in mid-July. He parked the car close to the path into the orange grove, tucked the silenced Browning into his belt, zipped the windbreaker up to the neck and headed into the trees. It was very quiet when he came back out of the grove and stepped across the low wall into the garden of the villa. The locals were all taking a siesta in the heat, and the rain began to patter onto the leaves of the orange trees; a score of large drops hit his shoulders as he crossed the flagstones, and when he reached the french windows the shower broke at last, drumming onto the pink tiles of the roof. He was glad; no one would hear a thing.

From a room to the left of the sitting room he heard a typewriter clack several times. He eased the gun out, standing immobile in the centre of the lounge, and moved the safety catch to *Fire*. Then he walked across the rush matting to the open study door.

Major Archie Summers never knew what happened or why. He saw a man standing in the doorway of his study and half rose to inquire what he wanted. Then he saw what was in the visitor's hand and half opened his mouth. There were two soft plops, drowned by the rain outside, and he took both bullets in the chest. The third was fired vertically downwards at 2-foot range into his temple, but he didn't even feel that one. The Corsican knelt by the body for a moment and put a forefinger where the pulse should have been. Still crouching he swivelled round to face the sitting-room door...

The two men met the next evening in the bar in the Rue Miollin, the killer and the client. Calvi had telephoned his message that morning after arriving back from Valencia the previous evening just before midnight, and Sanderson had flown over at once. The client seemed nervous as he handed over the rest of the £5000.

'No problems at all?' he asked again. The Corsican smiled quietly and shook his head.

'Very simple, and your major is very dead. Two bullets in the heart and one through the head.'

'No one saw you?' asked the Englishman. 'No witnesses?'

'No.' The Corsican rose, patting the wads of notes into his breast pocket. 'Though I'm afraid I was interrupted at the end. For some reason it was raining hard, and someone came in and saw me with the body.'

The Englishman stared at him in horror. 'Who?'

'A woman.'

'Tall, dark-haired?'

'Yeah. A nice-looking piece too.' He looked down at the expression of panic in the client's face, and patted the man on the shoulder.

'Don't worry, monsieur,' he said reassuringly, 'there will be no comebacks. I shot her, too.'

