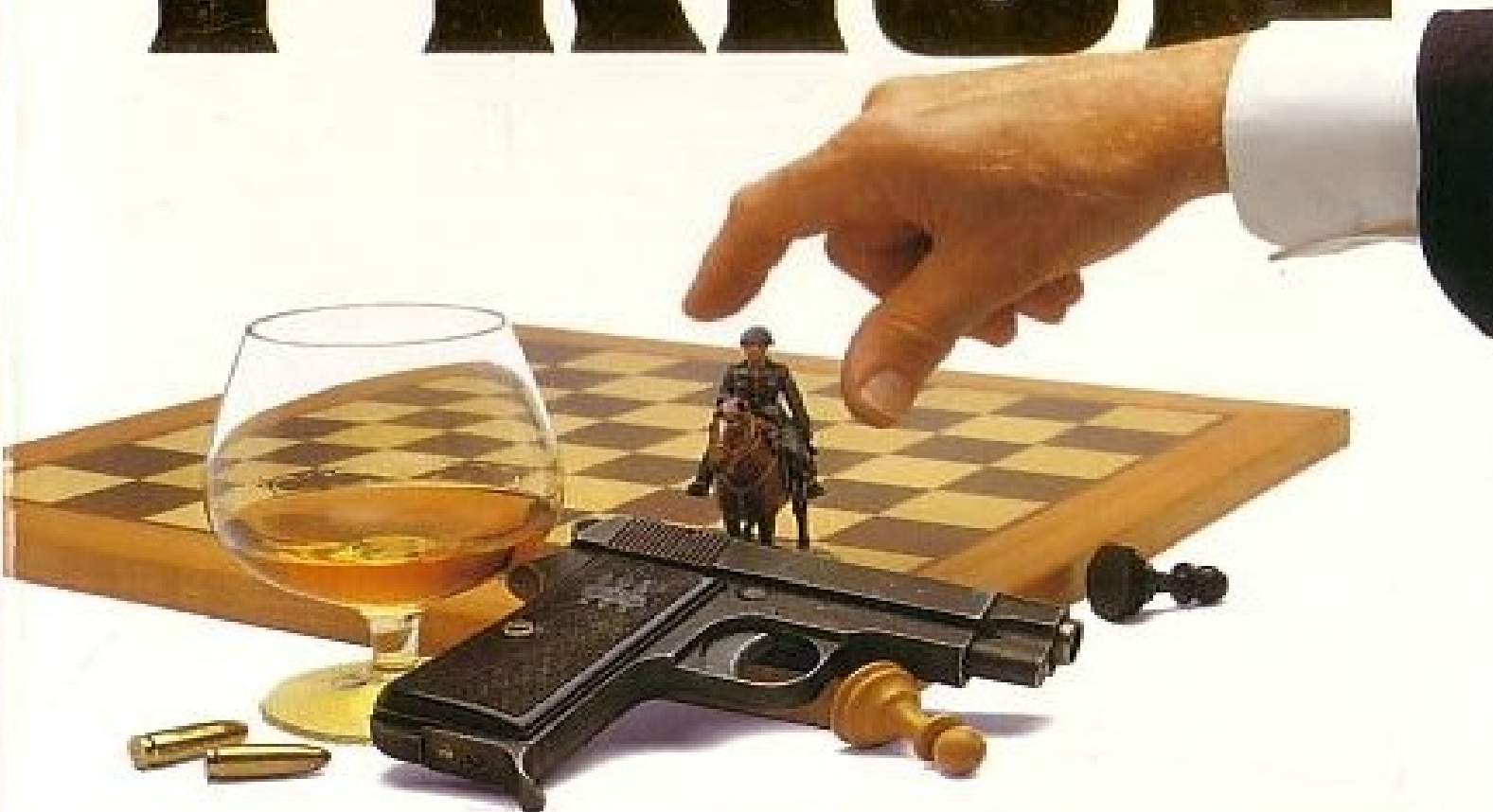


ANTHONY PRICE



OCTOBER MEN

'DEFINITELY A WINNER'
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THE GENERAL SAT quietly in his car at the airport terminal, waiting for his mother and his mistress.

To have driven himself after dark was, he knew, an emotional action, perhaps even a foolish one. But then he had never attempted to impose on his private life that ruthless discipline which had characterised his professional career. Indeed, he was convinced that those with great power and responsibility must allow themselves a calculated measure of self-indulgence, which was then not a weakness but a safety valve; as a student of history he frequently reminded himself that in matters that did not concern the state it was Caesar's wife who had to be above suspicion, not Caesar.

He drew on his cigar, puffing the smoke carefully out of the window. He wasn't supposed to smoke cigars either, in fact he had promised both women that he wouldn't smoke at all while they were away. Yet he felt only mildly guilty about his broken promise, for he had also never been able to resist the minor forbidden things of life, like smoking cigars and parking in the prohibited area right in front of the terminal. And from the number of cars parked around him the latter was clearly a national characteristic, and in his view a healthy one.

In any case, it was comforting to know that he had only himself to blame for being at the wheel when most sensible men of his age who worked as hard as he did were in their beds. For even if he might fret at his mother for her ridiculous economy in taking a cheap night flight he had to admit that she had neither asked nor expected him to attend her return. She had simply assumed that he would send his driver—which would have been less embarrassing as well as easier, since he suspected that she knew very well that her companion was as necessary to his peace of mind as to her own.

In fact there were plenty of good, sensible reasons for his not being here at Leonardo da Vinci's truly. Only there were two other reasons, neither better nor more rational, which outweighed them all.

Quite simply and literally, he could not wait to get his hands on Angela. Not (somewhat to his surprise) in any lascivious way, but just in a strangely old-fashioned loving manner. All he wanted to do was to take hold of those splendid hips, one hand to each flank, and look at her. If it went no farther than that tonight he would not be discontented; it had taken him forty years and two marriages to discover that there was more than one kind of intimacy through which a man could enjoy a woman's company, and he was almost as excited about that discovery as he had been all those years ago about the other.

Physically, the feel of those hips would be enough. There was no denying that Angela's legs were long and elegant, her bottom shapely for a woman of her years, and her bosom magnificent. But the

General had always liked hips, for they were the one thing about women that reminded him of horses. And Angela's hips were incomparable.

Yet if Angela was one indulgent reason for making this sweaty drive (though a reason more spiritual than his mother might suspect), there was also a contrary physical reason which no one suspected.

For the truth was that the General could no longer see very well at night.

He, whose military reputation was founded on those two famous night actions, one against the British and the other against the Germans, now feared that age was beginning to impair his night vision. And characteristically he was fighting this sign of incipient decay as furiously as he had ever done any of his human enemies.

So to have let anyone else drive this night, as he would have done without a thought a few years earlier, would have been to pass up a challenge to impose his will on his body. It was typical of him to dramatise this as a battle against odds, an immortal rearguard action, just as he saw his relationship with Angela as the bonus of a fully-matured intelligence. He would not let it occur to him that the spectres of old age and loneliness, which stalked ordinary men and women, would ever dare approach him.

So now he sat smoking happily in the No Parking lot, thinking of hips and screwing his eyes up in an attempt to watch the late night life of the airport.

Anyway, the car was more comfortable than the lounge at the terminal, with its smart chair architect-designed for discomfort and its depressing collection of waiting humanity nervous with excitement or querulous with tiredness, and with the bored cleaners manoeuvring their huge vacuum machines over the black rubber floors.

He glanced at his watch. The scream of the reversed jets he had heard a few minutes before would have been those of the Alitalia DC9 from Heathrow, which had probably left Pisa about the same time as he had set out from the villa. Any moment now the first passengers would be spilling out.

Not that they were any different nowadays from coach and railway passengers. The General could remember the old Rome airport in the old days, when the world was young and air travel was high adventure. He could even remember—how could he ever forget!—being presented to Marshal Ball there at the beginning of one of his great aerial expeditions.

It had been one of the decisive moments of his life when the Marshal had shaken his hand and looked him in the eye and admonished him never to lead from the back—and had lived up to his own words moments later as the formation of long-range bombers roared overhead. Here they began to come. But there was no need to stir himself, because his mother would be last. She always came last, and he could remember his father ranting at her for it on railway platforms halfway across the world.

Balbo had been wrong, of course. There were times to lead from the front and times to lead from the back. And the hardest times of all were when it was prudent to let others lead. But Balbo had changed his life, nevertheless—though less by the example of his career than by the manner of his death. For it had been on the day that the Duce had murdered the Marshal in the air above Tobruk because he knew the truth about the armed forces and wasn't afraid to speak it that the young Captain Montuori had ceased to be a Fascist...

He nodded to himself philosophically, watching the travellers congregate outside the terminus, idly sorting them into their proper categories with half his mind, natives and foreigners, holidaying couples and rucksacked students—only the unlucky, the ignorant and the young braved midsummer Rome!

Except his mother, naturally, who behaved in her own way, regardless of everything and everyone.

The General watched a pale-coloured car farther up the parked line to his left slide forward smoothly, curving in front of him in the wake of a big grey Fiat into which the blonde woman with the baby—

His thought was extinguished by the fierce headlights of another car on his right which for one blinding instant illuminated the driver of the pale car moving across his front. It was like a photographic flash, so brief was it, but still long enough to transmit an image through the General's eye and etch it on his brain, to be instantly registered, identified and remembered.

Remembered!

He sat rigid with excitement: there was no possibility of mistake, not one ten-thousandth particle or a possibility, no question of failing night sight playing him false with the vision of that profile so unremarkable but unforgotten.

Or unremarkable on this side, anyway. And since the years had changed its hungry outline so little they would have done nothing to erase the scar on the other side which ran from cheekbone to jawline—the General's own parting gift, delivered with the raking stock of his sub-machine gun. And he would not have misused a good weapon so if there hadn't been a company of German Alpine troops on the hillside less than three hundred metres below them: he would have used it as the Beretta company had intended, and good riddance!

But maybe he should have taken the risk at that—he thrust the hot memory down as the car passed out of his range of sight. The Bastard had been out of his territory then, just as he was out of his territory now. Only now he was out of his time too—sitting there alone in his car, sitting alone like the General, waiting for someone, also like the General. Except that he had driven off smartly having met nobody—the flashing headlights had shown that too. So someone hadn't come?

The General swore and reached for the ignition. Someone had been here right enough—but the

Bastard had not been here waiting to say “Hullo” to him!

He slammed the gear selector over, flicked the light switch and jammed his foot on the accelerator. There was still just about time enough to catch up with him—

Except that his mother was standing directly in his way.

He jammed down his foot on the brake pedal even more fiercely than he had done on the accelerator. The car tyres squealed and slithered.

“Mother, for the love of God—“ the General began despairingly “Mother—“

“Raffaele!” The General’s mother had a remarkably deep voice for so very feminine a woman, and although her admonitory tone towards him had changed over the course of fifty-eight years, it was fundamentally still that of a long-suffering mother to her slow-witted son. “Don’t sit there with your mouth open, Raffaele!”

“Mother—“

The General’s mother turned her back on him. It was a well-dressed back too, he noticed bitterly, after four years of widowhood black still dominated her wardrobe conventionally—but it was always the black of Antonelli and Mila Schoen and Valentino (and God in His heaven only knew what English house she had probably found by now to spend his money on).

“Angela!” The General’s mother did not shout, she simply projected her voice. “Tell that fellow to bring the cases here.”

He reached out and switched off the engine: when the odds were hopeless even the bravest man could surrender without discredit, and these odds, as he had good reason to know, were infinitely too much for him.

“Raffaele! Are you going to sit there all night?”

The General groped for the door handle. Already it had a quality of unreality, that sudden vision of the past. And he was really too old for these night games, anyway: there was something more than a little ridiculous about the idea of tearing through the night after his old enemy. And finally, it was too late now—his mother had seen to that. It had been too late ever since he had used the butt instead of the bullet twenty-eight years ago.

And then, as his fingers touched the handle, the General was pricked by that ancient instinct, that atavistic feeling of unease which had once been like an extra sense to him, as to be relied on as sight and hearing and smell.

He had thought that it had atrophied during his long spell behind desks of increasing size. But he was stirring his innermost soul again: *too old*, it was saying, if you are too old, then so is your enemy. Too old to be waiting in the darkness unless there is really something worth waiting for.

“Raffaele!”

So the grey Fiat was worth waiting for—or rather the grey Fiat’s occupants, who would be on the passenger list for all to see.

It was as simple as that.

“Coming, Mother!” said the General happily.

At the precise moment that General Raffaele Montuori put his foot on the tarmac at Leonardo da Vinci Airport, Mrs. Ada Clark put her foot on the worn piece of carpet beside her bed in her cottage on the edge of Steeple Horley.

It had been the gammon steak at her sister-in-law’s, which had been salted enough to preserve until Judgement Day and which had dried her mouth until she could bear it no longer—it was a wonder to Mrs. Clark that Jim looked so well after so many years of bad cooking, of over-salted meats and under-salted vegetables, and altogether too much out of packets and tins.

And that line of well-used sauce bottles told its own tale too, of flavourless food that went begging for a taste of something real, no matter what.

Mrs. Clark searched irritably with her toes for her slippers in the darkness, looking out of the window as she did so. It had been clear earlier, but had clouded over now in preparation for the further rain which the BBC weatherman had forecast, so that it was impossible to see where the dark squalls began and the roll of the downs ended.

Suddenly the foot stopped searching, thirst was forgotten and Mrs. Clark was wide awake, staring breathlessly out of her window.

There it was again, only longer this time!

Decisively she reached across the bed and shook her husband by the shoulder.

“Charlie, wake up!”

Charlie Clark groaned unbelievably.

Mrs. Clark shook the shoulder again. “Charlie, there’s someone up at the Old House—someone breaking in! Wake up!”

Charlie rolled on to his back, blinking in the darkness, grappling with the unpalatable sequence of information.

Finally he computed an answer, or at least a delaying question. “ ‘Ow do you know? You can’t see nothing, surely?’ ”

“I can see a light, a flashing light—like a torch going on and off.”

“Car lights, that ‘ud be.”

“That it’s not!” Mrs. Clark insisted hotly. “You don’t get no reflections all that way, and there are those trees in the way. And besides—” she overrode his murmur of disagreement triumphantly “—there aren’t no cars on the road, or I’d ‘uv heard ‘em. I tell you there’s someone up at the Old House. Someone as don’t dare switch the lights on.”

Charlie grumbled under his breath and heaved himself out of bed, reaching for his pullover.

“I reckon it’ll be some of those tearaways from the town,” Mrs. Clark said to him over his shoulder, the outrage quavering in her voice. “A gang of them broke into a big house down Midhurst way last week—it was in the paper. They said there’d been seven robberies round there in the last month.”

Charlie felt his way round the bed until he was standing beside his wife. As he bent down to peep out of the little window she pointed quickly.

“There! You see where the flash came—”

“Yes, I see’d ‘un.” Charlie was not given to believing half he was told or a tenth of what he read, but he always believed his own eyes. And there had been no doubt about that pale light. “It’ll be the young buggers right enough—young buggers they are.”

Mrs. Clark nodded at the vehemence in her husband’s voice. It frightened her to think of the things loose in the beautiful house she had scrubbed and polished for a lifetime—scrubbed and polished so much that she almost felt it was partly hers and she was part of it.

But also it angered her, and the anger grew steadily, crowding out the fear.

Charlie moved away from her.

“What you goin’ to do?” She could hear him fumbling in the darkness. “Don’t you put the light on, Charlie!”

“I ain’t a fool. I’m lookin’ to put me trousers on, an’ then I’ll get on down to the police house. Let ‘em sort it out.”

“What!” Mrs. Clark rounded on him fiercely, her sense of outrage now dominant. The police house was at Upper Horley, two long miles away, and half of that uphill. “You’ll not do that! You do that and they’ll be out an’ gone by the time Tom Yates gets ‘ere—out and gone.”

A terrible vision of destruction rose in her imagination, compounded of all she had heard and read. They weren’t like the old-time burglars she had known in her youth, men who knew the value of things and were interested only in what they could sell—they were destroyers now who did unspeakable, senseless, wasteful things. They were the invaders from a world she could not comprehend, the city jungle spilling into the quiet, ordered countryside.

Charlie stared towards her in the blackness, one pyjama-clad leg half stuffed into his trousers.

“You don’t mean for me to go up there—?”

“That’s just exactly what I do mean. An’ I’ll go and get Tom Yates meantime.”

“Ah—and they’ll make mincemeat of me meantime, too, woman. Them’s young an’ I’m not.”

“Then you just take your old gun with you. They won’t ‘ave the guts to tackle you then, not if you stand up to them.”

Charlie had the gravest doubts about the validity of this theory of his wife’s—it was not the first time he heard her voice it, that young hooligans had no courage. But he could recall the way the rats had behaved at threshing time, in the days before the combine harvesters when there was still plenty of work to be had on the land: if you left the rats alone they soon made themselves scarce, pest though they were. But if you cornered them—they fought, rats or no, snapping at the stick as it broke their backs.

And that, it seemed to Charlie, was what she was asking him to do to these young buggers—corner ‘em.

“I dunno about that,” he began doubtfully.

“Well I do,” Mrs. Clark snapped back, through the rustle of clothes pulled hurriedly over her head. “And I knows something else too: that I promised Master David that I’d look after the house while he was away—and so I will. So if you won’t go up to it, then I shall have to. And you can go and wake up Tom Yates.”

Charlie swore under his breath and wrenched at his trousers. Somehow he had been manoeuvred into a corner himself, a corner from which there was no escape except by doing his wife’s bidding. He never could fathom how she managed it, but it was a position with which he was all too bitterly familiar.

He was swearing still, steadily and bitterly, as he edged his way up the lane towards the Old House five minutes later.

Of all the nights of this rotten summer, this was the worst for such tom-fool behaviour. It was pitch black and chilly and sopping wet, without a breath of wind. The rain must have stopped an hour more since and the heavy summer foliage had had time to drip off its surplus moisture, so that everything was quiet enough to hear a mouse stir.

It was this stillness that made him swear now. He had tried two or three steps on the gravel drive but the scrunch of his iron-shod boots had deafened him. His only chance of a silent approach to the house was by the rough strip of grass beside the high hedgerow on his right.

He thought he knew both the grass and the hedge like the back of his hand; he had walked beside the one and picked blackberries and hazelnuts from the other innumerable times. But now he stumbled

awkwardly, his trousers already soaked to the knee, his face lashed every now and then by unsee
twigs and sodden leaves.

And yet, perversely, this discomfort aroused in him a determination to do the job his wife had thrust upon him. When he had blundered out of the cottage he had been half decided to save himself from the unpleasantness—and very possible danger—of catching the little sods in the act by warning them of his advance with a bit of well-judged noise. But now, as he moved silently from the grass verge to the springy turf of the lawn, the smouldering irritation inside him ignited into a murderous rage.

He'd learn they little buggers!

There was a lot in life that irritated Charlie Clark: big cars and noisy motorcycles, long hair and short skirts, letters from government ministries asking him questions he didn't want to answer, people telling him things he didn't care to know about, and the high price and the low strength of beer. And above most of all being bullied by anyone in the world but his wife—he didn't like that much either, but he reckoned it was more or less covered by the promise he'd made to the vicar when they'd gone to the altar together.

But always the enemy had been either intangible or plainly beyond his reach—always except those two times.

It was queer that he could never remember either of those two episodes in any detail. He could really only remember what had happened before and what had happened after.

There had been the quick, clever boy at the village school, who had mocked him once too often. And then there had been blood on Charlie's knuckles afterwards, and no more mocking.

And the second time had been more like tonight, even though he had had a rifle in his hands then, not a cranky old twelve-bore.

Not unlike this very night, though it had been much warmer, as was only to be expected in foreign parts. Almost as dark, anyway, except that they'd been fools that time too, and showed a bit of a light to guide the patrol.

Charlie's eyes picked up the glimmer of the torch inside the Old House the moment he came out from the lane on to the springy turf of the lawn. They'd drawn the curtains now, but it was a powerful bright light, that was sure. Only trouble, it was in a first-floor room—he knew the downstairs pretty well, but wasn't so sure of the lie of the upstairs.

And there'd been more smell the last time, the rich smell of farmyard middens. But then it'd been a farmhouse, longer and lower than this one, huddled into the ground almost. There was talk in the platoon that the farmers kept all their money in boxes under their beds, not trusting the foreign banks—which showed they had some sense, Charlie had thought, seeing as he didn't trust the banks at home.

either—and also that it was all in gold francs, too. By the time of the raid Charlie had privately searched several farmhouses with those gold francs in mind, but either it was an old wives' tale or someone had been there before him; personally he doubted the story, for all the farms seemed to him poor and rough, without a decent suite of furniture between them, not at all like those he was used to in Sussex, where farmers were usually men of substance and very often gentlemen, too.

Still, they didn't ought to have treated that old farm the way they had, throwing the grenades through the windows and kicking in the doors, all shouting like savages.

Charlie knew he had shouted with the rest, and kicked too, but that had only been because he'd been angry, red, raging angry at being drilled and marched one way, then marched another way, and forced to cower in ditches in terror of bombs and bullets, with never a chance to get his own back. But it never do to kick in the door of the Old House, even the old kitchen door and even if it hadn't been solid seasoned oak, which he reckoned wouldn't reward anyone's boot. And anyway—she'd given him a key, he had it somewhere, thought Charlie confusedly, fumbling for reality in his mind while he searched his jacket with his free hand.

He had to get it right, just like the sergeant had taught him, making him repeat it until he had the meaning by heart: *First you creeps up quiet-like, to take 'em by surprise—then you goes in noisy, frighten the bollocks off 'em!*

And first he did get it right, with the key hardly scratching the keyhole it entered. But no amount of care could stop the lock clicking unmistakably, or the latch clattering or the hinges creaking—it was as though the whole door had turned against him, bit by bit, damn it.

Charlie clutched the twelve-bore against his chest and stood irresolutely, listening to the absolute silence of the house ahead of him.

It was a silence which confused him far more than it frightened him, until the memory of the flashing light in the upstairs room came back to him—the evidence of his own eyes.

The time had come to be noisy!

With a furious growl and in total darkness Charlie launched himself across the kitchen. The first chair in his way went spinning; he banged into the edge of the table, driving it back so that it overturned another chair. But the table's position orientated him to the passage door. Three more skidding paces, hobnails skittering on the stone floor, brought him against it. Behind him something breakable crashed to the floor.

Four more paces took him down the passage to the foot of the stairs—the last footfall was muffled by the carpet with the eastern writing on it that his wife had told him never to put a boot on. Well, he'd got both boots on it now!

The tingling silence abruptly descended around him again. And yet not a true silence any more, but the moment when the gamekeeper and the poacher sensed each other's presence in the same cover, the moment of held breath and stretched senses.

It had not been like this in the farmhouse, it had been just how the sergeant had wanted it, all noise and terror.

Charlie reached out for the light switch.

"I knows you're up there," he said in a loud voice. "You just come on down quiet, an' don't make no trouble. Police is comin'. So you just come on down."

He clicked the switch.

There was bursting paper-bag noise—that had been the farmhouse noise he'd never been able to recall—and a hornet stung his ear.

Same noise with same result: as the man at the head of the stairs sighted the pistol again, this time on Charlie's heart, Charlie shot him dead.

VILLARI'S MANNERS, OR more exactly his attitude towards those whom he considered inferior to himself had not improved, that was evident.

First the fellow had idly fingered the files and envelopes on Boselli's desk, disarranging the mathematical relation to one another. Then he had admired himself in the little round mirror beside the door, patting the golden perfection of his hair and checking his flawless complexion. And then he had sauntered over to the window to gaze without apparent interest over the roofscape towards the Vittorio Emanuele monument. And finally, when he deigned at last to speak, he didn't even bother to turn round to face Boselli.

"Who's this guy Audley then?"

Boselli stared at the well-tailored back with hatred. If looks could kill he felt that his would have materialised into six inches of steel angled slightly upwards just beneath the left shoulder blade.

"Audley?" The anger blurred his voice.

"The guy you're getting steamed up about, yes."

It was typical of Villari to use that aggravating and unfair "you," even though he'd come running across a heat-stricken Rome obediently enough himself. But then Villari had always known when to temper his native insolence with a shrewd instinct for the whims of his superiors. The feet that kicked the Bosellis of the world at every opportunity trod very carefully on the carpets of men like Raffaele Montuori.

"We're not getting steamed up."

"So you're not getting steamed up—fine." Villari moved across the airless room, back to the mirror again. "You're not getting steamed up, but you're here."

That "here" carried the same disparagement as the earlier "you," turning Boselli's own beloved sanctuary, with its rows of battered steel cabinets and its signed portrait of John XXIII into an unspeakable slum.

"And you are here too," replied Boselli acidly. He mopped his brow with the big silk handkerchief his eldest daughter had given him on his last birthday, fancying as he did so that Villari had chosen even those words "steamed up" with deliberate scorn also. For all his North Italian, almost Scandinavian blondness, the younger man showed not a sign of discomfort in the swelter—it was Boselli himself, the Roman, who was already wilting.

But that bitter little thought raised another much more interesting one which momentarily chased away Boselli's private discomforts. There had to be a reason for the General to recall this gilded Clotheshorse from his leave beyond the fact that he happened to be here in Rome. If the General had wanted someone from Venice or Messina—or Benghazi—he wouldn't have thought twice about summoning him. So it was Villari and none other that he wanted now. And since Villari combined fluency in the North European languages with the right colouring and an ability to withstand extremes of temperature, cold as well as hot, it must be that Villari was needed to check up on Audley in England.

Which meant that the General was committed to a line of action, or was at least on the very brink of commitment.

And that was a useful thing to know, even though he had not as yet the faintest idea what Audley—

Villari suddenly loomed up directly in front of the desk, cutting off this intriguing line of reflection. He placed his hands precisely on the two corners—the desk creaked alarmingly as it took his weight—and leaned forward until his face was less than fifty centimetres from Boselli's.

“Little man, little man—“ Villari's smile was as devoid of good humour as it was of friendship “—I can hear the cogs and wheels whirring in your little brain but you haven't answered my question. And when I ask a question I expect you to provide an answer.”

Boselli sat up stiffly and drew back in the same instant, the faint smell of expensive cologne in his nostrils.

“I haven't been told to answer any questions,” he snapped. “I have no authorisation to answer questions.”

“Authorisation?” The grin became frozen, but there was a glint of anger in Villari's eyes now. “You have the soul of a clerk, little Boselli. A clerk you were born and a clerk you will die.”

He straightened up slowly. “But I don't need to lose my temper, because I have my own way with clerks. It's a very simple way—let me show you how I treat clerks who bandy words with me. You could call it my authorisation—“

He put his hand in the middle of Boselli's desk and with an unhurried movement, before Boselli could even think of stopping him, swept half the surface clear.

A second too late, unavailingly, Boselli jerked forward in an attempt to stop the cascade of papers, grabbing desperately and clumsily, catching nothing. Villari watched him scrabbling on his knees for a moment and then, as though bored with the whole affair, turned away towards the window again.

“You're—mad,” Boselli heard himself muttering in anguish as he sorted the jumbled documents. “It'll take me hours—hours—“ He cut off the complaint as he realised that it would only give Villa

more satisfaction. He had no dignity left to salvage and no hope of lodging any sort of complaint without further humiliating himself (the crafty swine had calculated that exactly). Silence was all that remained to him.

But silence did not seem to worry Villari. He merely waited until the papers had been shovelled more or less into their correct files, and the files had been piled more or less in their original places, a mockery of their original neatness. Then he advanced again.

Instinctively Boselli set his hands over the files in a pathetic attempt to protect them.

Villari laughed.

“If you could see yourself!” He shook his head. “Better death than disorder! So we start again, the who is the man Audley? Speak up, clerk.”

Boselli sighed. “What makes you think it is Audley who concerns you?”

Villari looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, as though undecided as to whether or not to assault the files again. Then, to Boselli’s unbounded relief, he relaxed; the game of bullying had palled, or more likely the need for information from a beaten opponent commended itself more urgently.

“Well, he seems to concern you, little Boselli. His name is written all over your files—three folders all to himself, and one from the Foreign Ministry. What a busy fellow he must be!” The manicured hand pointed carelessly. “And isn’t that a photograph too?”

He tweaked open one of the covers and twisted round the contents.

“Hmm... Not a particularly prepossessing type. In fact he reminds me of a bouncer I met in a club in Hamburg—he thought he was a hard man.” Villari sniffed at the memory, then held the photograph up at arm’s length for a more critical look. “The suit’s okay— you can’t beat the English for tailoring—but he’s filling it too much ... a big tough guy running to seed.” He nodded to himself. “A bit like that actor of theirs who’s always getting into scrapes with the cops. Another tough one.”

Boselli smiled inwardly then, permitting himself to be drawn into the game at last by Villari’s crass error of judgement.

“You’re looking at the wrong half of the face. Look at the eyes and the forehead.”

Villari blanked off the squashed nose and square jaw with his other hand and stared at the photograph again. He shrugged. “So—a hard man with a brain. But don’t let him fool you, clerk: you let him talk you into a dark alley he’ll still break you in small pieces and feed you to the birds.”

“Then he has kept that side of his character remarkably secret,” observed Boselli with pride and satisfaction. “He has a doctorate from the University of Cambridge in England—he is Dr. David Longsdon Audley.”

Villari flicked the photograph carelessly on to the table, so that it skidded across the open file and fell to the floor beside Boselli's foot. Then, with elaborate indifference, he turned away towards the window for the third time.

Only this time Boselli watched him with a tremor of satisfaction. It was little enough recompense for that act of vandalism, but it was a start. And there was more to come.

"He's been a member of Sir Frederick Clinton's self-styled Research Group for quite a few years," he went on with smug innocence. "I'm rather surprised you haven't heard of him."

Villari appeared not to have heard. For several minutes he remained gazing at the distant skyline, though it interested him, deepening Boselli's pleasure appreciably. Of course he would have heard of the old fox Clinton, and possibly even of the Research Group. But the records showed that he had never encountered either of them personally—perhaps another reason why the General was using him now—and he was too puffed up with his own importance to admit it to Boselli. Conceding ignorance would be unthinkable for him, very different as it was from brutally demanding information.

Finally Villari spoke, only to Boselli's chagrin he did so in almost accentless English.

"This Dr. Audley—is he a *dottore* doctor or a *professore* doctor?"

Boselli struggled with the mixture of foreign and Italian words for a moment, and before he could quite disentangle the sentence Villari had grabbed the chance of explaining it with deliberate patronising helpfulness.

"An historian," Boselli cut through the explanation irritably. "He is an historian."

"A historian?" The interest trickled out of Villari's tone. "A teacher of history?"

"He writes—he's written a history of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem. And he's written books on medieval Arab history. He—"

Villari waved his hand. "Okay, okay—he's a real historian too. So what has he done to interest us?"

Boselli looked at him unhappily for a few seconds. Then he shrugged—there was no way of skirting the question and no way of answering it. "I haven't the faintest idea. He—General Montuori, that is—he instructed me to examine our information on him—on Audley, I mean. He didn't tell me why."

"And naturally you hadn't the guts to ask him. That figures."

"When the General wants us to know, he'll tell us. He knows what he's doing."

Villari reached over and hooked the telephone off its cradle with a ringer. "And I like to know what I'm doing." He started to dial.

"It's no good ringing the General's secretary," Boselli stood up in alarm. "She promised to let me know the moment the General was free."

“I’m not phoning that old cow—tits to her! I’m phoning the General.”

Boselli was appalled and elated at the same time. The General’s private number was sacrosanct. This Clotheshorse would be hanged, crucified, flayed and impaled. But it was his—Boselli’s—phone on which the unthinkable crime was being perpetrated, rendering him an accessory. At the very least he would be banished to some far-off province still ruled by the Communist Party.

“Hey, General—Armando Villari here, General—“

“Armando—good to see you again, my boy!” The General came beaming from behind his vast desk towards Villari, without even a glance for Boselli.

“General.” Villari acknowledged the enthusiasm as though it was nothing less than his right, but with a touch of caution now. “This is a hell of a time to want anyone to work.”

“Hah!” The General embraced him, keeping his arm round the broad shoulders as he turned back towards the desk. “I know you, boy, I know you! It’s those big German girls of yours—you like the big girls, eh? I know it—don’t deny it, boy—I remember them myself when I was your age. Firm breasts and wonderful hips! What hips they had!”

The bitterness rose in Boselli’s throat like bile as he watched the hand squeeze the shoulder affectionately. He recognised the whole vomit-making scene for what it was: through some ghastly aberration of judgement the General was identifying himself with the Clotheshorse, or at least his youth, part of which had been spent back in the Duce’s day training with the German Special Forces in Bavaria. But that was something which was never mentioned now, an episode very carefully overlooked, if not forgotten—that the General should even indirectly mention it now was an extraordinary personal gaffe.

“I’m too goddamned busy for girls, General,” said Villari easily. “You should know that—it’s your fault.”

The General chuckled. “You don’t fool me one bit, boy. You’ll stop chasing when you stop breathing, not one moment before. I’m much more worried that you aren’t keeping up your skiing. You’ll never make the national team now, you know—not a chance of it. And don’t say you haven’t had the leave for it, either.”

Boselli, greatly daring, cleared his throat.

“I have the Audley files here, sir.”

The General still didn’t look at him. Indeed, neither of them gave the least sign that they had even heard him speak. It was just as though he didn’t exist, or that he existed in some other space and time, a shadow man with his armful of shadow documents desperately waiting for someone in a warmer, more real world to notice him. He had a sudden pathetic desire to scream and stamp and throw all his

paperwork into the air, and shout rude gutter words.

Instead, he felt himself shrinking, the sweat on his forehead cold in the General's air conditioning and he knew he would stand there, meek and eager, until his turn at the end of the queue came. There was nothing new in this, it was the very pattern of his existence. Rather must he watch patiently for the arrival of his moment, when the General and Villari came down to earth. They would need him then—they always did in the end.

“Not a chance is dead right,” Villari gave a snort. “Nobody who works for you has time for fun—no games. It's getting so a chap can't even slip through Rome for a day without you catching him. And it's the wrong season for trouble—this Audley of yours has no breeding.”

“Audley? So you know about him?” The General's arm delivered a final man-to-man slap and the papers fell away from the shoulders. He turned abruptly and bent a fierce eye on Boselli at last.

Boselli tried for one second to match the eye and the hard set of the mouth, but his face instantly turned traitor on him with an expression of total obsequiousness.

“I—“ Boselli ran out of words after the first squeak, looking helplessly from one man to the other. From Villari he expected—and received—nothing, neither explanation nor even recognition. And from the General—with the General it was always the same: there seemed to lie between them (at least in Boselli's mind) unasked for the knowledge that when he had been a pimply youth toying with the idea of the seminary the General had been a daring Bersaglieri captain, raider of British airfields, and then the leader of the Partisan group which had ambushed Panzergeneral Hofacker in the mountains.

And hot on that memory came the comparison of his wife's sagging body with those of the gorgeous creatures the General always had at heel, despite his age and disabilities.

The General couldn't help it—he rarely even barked at Boselli. The trouble was, he didn't have to. “I don't know *about* him,” said Villari offhandedly. “I know *of* him, of course.”

“What do you know of him, boy?” the General snapped.

“Not much, to be honest,” Villari gave the General a sidelong glance. “The British don't concern me directly—or do they?”

“Just answer the question,” repeated the General with a small cutting edge in his voice now which warmed Boselli. This was more like the real man he knew.

Villari sketched a shrug, unsnubbed, as though the matter was of little importance to him, ignoring or pretending to ignore the danger sign. “He's a university professor, or that's his cover anyway.”

“He has been attached to a university, that's true. Go on.”

But only partly true, Boselli thought gleefully. The Clotheshorse was already giving himself away

“Go on,” repeated the General.

“Well, he writes history books of some sort—about the Arabs, I seem to remember. Or something like that. And he’s one of Sir Frederick—ah—Clinton’s group—“

“And what do you know about *that*,” the General pounced hard.

Villari grinned at him boyishly. “Frankly, damn all, General. Am I supposed to? I didn’t think the British were in my sphere of operations.”

“Where did you hear about Audley?”

“Hell, I don’t know,” Villari was something less sure of himself now, and something less than convincing. “I keep my ear to the ground—I hear all sorts of things.”

Mostly bottles opening and bedroom doors closing, thought Boselli. That was the strength of it.

“You’ve never met Audley, then?”

“No, never.” Villari used the certainty of his reply to cover the relief in his voice, without realising that he was thereby admitting that he knew what Audley looked like, Boselli thought with instant contempt. If this were the pride of the German section, then God help them: no wonder they gave him so much time off to ski. He gave himself away every time he opened his handsome mouth.

But the General was obviously not interested in pursuing Villari’s incompetence any farther. He retired to the farther side of his desk and sat down heavily.

“Tell him, Boselli,” he ordered dispassionately.

Boselli gave a guilty start. “Tell him what, sir? About Dr. Audley?”

“The Clinton group first. And don’t stand there sweating—sit down.” The General waved a hand. “Sit down both of you. And make it brief, Boselli. I haven’t all the afternoon.”

“Sir—“ Boselli faced the General, then Villari. The punitive gleam in Villari’s eye drove him back at once to the General. “The origins of the group go back to the aftermath of the Suez failure—“

“Not its history, man. Tell him what it does!”

“Yes, sir. Well—“ Boselli began again nervously “—it doesn’t exactly *do* anything. I mean—Christ! He was getting himself as tangled as Villari had been, and with far less reason. He couldn’t sit one metre, or hang expensive suits on himself, or fornicate with foreign women. But this one gift he had.

“It was formed as a passive intelligence group, not an active one,” he said firmly, his voice gaining authority with each word. “The various labels it has used have been more for accounting convenience than a guide to its function—it goes under Research and Development at the moment, but its true relation with the conventional intelligence arms is broadly analogous with pure research departments.”

in a university and the applied research departments in major commercial companies.”

“What the Americans call a ‘Think Tank’,” observed the General helpfully, watching Villari.

“Broadly speaking, yes,” Boselli nodded. “But there was a considerable spin-off in forward intelligence.”

“They forecasted international trends.”

“And trouble spots, sir. And likely reactions. They appear to have done this rather well. The one drawback was that they couldn’t do it to order. Clinton just let them follow their inclination, and they passed on what he thought might prove of value to the active departments and the appropriate ministries.”

He risked a surreptitious glance at Villari and was gratified to observe that the mask of aristocratic boredom had descended again. If the fool was stupid enough to show his disdain before the General—disdain of a briefing ordered by the General—then so much the better: the General always noticed things like that.

“Yes ... that about sums it up. Sir Frederick Clinton is an uncommonly astute and persuasive man,” the General murmured, the last words half to himself as though he fancied the idea of a private Think Tank at his own fingertips.

“Quite so, sir,” said Boselli quickly, hastily evaluating the note of envy in his master’s voice and thoroughly disapproving it. Such a group of intellectual outsiders would tend to devalue his own importance more likely than not. “But there is a disadvantage in his system—a disadvantage and temptation. And this man Audley exemplifies each of them.”

“Indeed?”

“These men—” Boselli marshalled his thoughts very carefully, “—they are difficult to control. There is a—a rogue factor in them. They pursue truth rather than policy.”

“I see ...” The General nodded thoughtfully. “And if the truth gets out, you mean—?”

“Exactly, sir!” It was an addictive pleasure to talk to a man who always grasped the exact meaning of one’s words. “This man Audley specialised in the Middle East. And he was good—he was very good. He was too good.”

“He was unpopular in some quarters, that’s true.”

Boselli nodded back. “He became committed to what he saw as the right course. Clinton had to get him out before there was a big scandal.” He paused, seeing the pitfall ahead just in time: the General evidently knew all about the Arab-Israeli report, and he disliked being told what he already knew—and what the Clotheshorse did not need to know even if he could grasp its significance.

“And that exposed Clinton to the temptation to use him in a different way—to deal with specific

assignments, the sort of awkward thing that would interest him.”

The General started to speak and then cocked an eye at Villari, who seemed half-asleep now.

“Would you say that was a temptation, Armando?”

Villari stretched. “Hardly. I rather think—Signor Boselli is making something out of nothing. Clinton uses the fellow as a trouble-shooter, that’s all. Nothing strange about that, nothing at all.”

Boselli watched the General’s almost imperceptible bob of agreement with dismay. He had failed to make his point, even though he felt in his bones he was right; it could only be that he had been out of shade too quick to attack the Think Tank idea and the General had seen through him. He retired bitterly into his shell.

Villari seemed to sense that the initiative was going begging again. He stirred languidly.

“And just what has this so very terrifying Englishman to do with me, General?”

The hatred inside Boselli was so absolute now that he could feel it as a lump in his chest, choking him. That adjective had been as much an insult directed at him as would have been an actual blow to the face.

“He is here in Rome at this moment,” said the General.

“Doing what?”

“Doing nothing—so far.” The General paused. “He arrived on the night flight from London early this morning.” He paused again. “With his wife, his child and his German *au pair* girl.”

“His—?” Villari gave a short, incredulous laugh.

Boselli lifted his eyes to the General’s face, the leaden lump of hatred instantly dispersed by his renewed interest.

“His wife, his child and his *au pair*?” Villari repeated the words as though he doubted his ears.

Fool, thought Boselli briefly. Fool not to wait for the additional facts which must lie beneath the one like vipers in a bed of flowers.

“We weren’t watching the flight, and he was on the passenger list anyway. It was an ordinary scheduled flight and a routine entry. Purpose of visit—holiday.”

Boselli waited patiently for the viper.

“But as luck would have it we did have a man there.”

“He was met?” Villari was trying to sound interested.

“Audley? No, he was not met,” the General shook his head, “not in the sense you mean, anyway. But there was someone there waiting for him all the same. Someone who didn’t want to be seen by

him. Someone who followed him when he drove off in his Hertz car.”

Someone we know, thought Boselli.

The General looked at him. “George Ruelle—does that name ring any bells with you, Boselli? It’s possible the bastard was before your time.”

George Ruelle. The curious thing was that the General had used the English form of the given name, *George*.

George Ruelle.

Before his time. But his time here had been almost exactly continuous with the General’s—they had both been new boys at the same time, albeit one at the bottom and the other at the top.

And that left one strong possibility at least.

“A partisan, General?”

“Good thinking.” The General’s smile was heartwarming. “Or should I say ‘good guessing’?”

“It was a guess, sir,” Boselli admitted.

“But a good one. Yes—Ruelle led a group in the next valley to mine. Group Stalingrad.”

Group Stalingrad. Now, that rang a bell, or the faint echo of one—a memory of ancient and better forgotten beastliness: of war to the knife with the Germans, when no prisoners were taken and no questions asked, and when reprisal brought bestial counterreprisal.

It had passed the studious young Boselli by, but it had not left him unscarred.

Group Stalingrad. That had been one of the merciless ones—and wasn’t there also a tale of British POWs (or were they American?) who had escaped in the confusion of 1943 only to be cold-heartedly sacrificed—by George Ruelle?

If that was the man he must be quite old by now—and frighteningly young to have been the leader of a partisan group in those far-off, unhappy days...

“This Ruelle followed Audley?” Villari’s voice cut through the memory.

“We think so. He was there at the airport, waiting in his car. He didn’t collect anyone, he went off directly after Audley’s car. He doesn’t live in Rome and as far as we know he hasn’t any business here.”

“Where did they go?”

“That’s the problem. Our man wasn’t in a position to follow them himself. We know where Audley’s staying, of course. But for the rest—“ The General’s shoulders lifted eloquently.

It was pretty slim. In fact it was really far too slim to act on if that was all there was to it, though

Boselli, still watching the General intently. A viper there certainly was; in fact it was patently because of that viper—Ruelle—that the General had become interested in Audley's arrival in the first place, not because of Audley.

He re-ran the General's voice in his head: there had been a tightness about it when it supplied the minimal information about Ruelle, "a group in the valley next to mine. Group Stalingrad." There could very well have been bad blood—if not actual blood—between the two partisan leaders, both young and ruthless, but one a Communist (only a Red would have named his group like that) and the other a blue-blooded army officer. Indeed, the more one thought about it, the more certain it seemed.

But there was precious little in reality to connect Ruelle and Audley beyond the fact that they had both left the airport one after another.

"Is Ruelle active?" asked Villari.

Boselli looked at him quickly, annoyed with himself for not asking the same question. The Clotheshorse's mind must be labouring along roughly the same track as his own, but its very slowness had enabled it to see something he had overlooked: tailing people was a young man's game, not an old man's one.

The General considered the question. "If he is, then this is the first we've heard about it," he said slowly. "In fact, if he is then it will be— disturbing."

"Why so?"

Once again there was an uncharacteristic delay before the General answered. "There was a time— it's a long time ago now—but there was a time when George Ruelle was considered to be a coming man, and a very dangerous one, too."

He looked from one to another of them. "That was after the war, when things were ... very different from now. Tito hadn't shown his hand then, and Albania was Red, and it was touch and go in Greece. Those were the days when the bastard used to visit Moscow two or three times a year." The General smiled suddenly and frostily. "I rather think that if things had gone his way, then he might have been sitting at this desk. And I would have been very dead, that's certain."

The frosty smile faded. "But they didn't go his way. And when Stalin died, that was the end of him. They didn't want to know him any more."

Villari frowned. "But there's still a Stalinist Wing here—I saw Brusati in the Senate as large as life when I went to see my uncle there in the spring—"

"True, boy!" The General nodded. "But Stalinism is one thing and Stalin's crimes are another. There are some things even the hardliners don't want to be reminded of, and that's what George Ruelle does to them: he reminds them of the dirty things they've done. So they've disciplined him and

pensioned him off—and told him to keep the hell out of their way and ours. And so he did, until v
spotted him again at the airport.”

So it was even slimmer still. If Ruelle was a has-been, his presence in the car park at the time
Audley’s arrival was probably no more than coincidence.

And as for Audley—*Purpose of visit—holiday* might well be the fact of it. The whole business w
simply not worth following up, and the sooner the General was advised to that effect, the better.

“Well—“ he began neutrally (the General liked to be shown at least two sides of any problem, n
matter how many or how few sides there were), “—in my view—“

“Nothing to it,” Villari steamrolled over his words. “If we acted on every chance meeting lik
this we’d never have time for real work. Ruelle obviously doesn’t count any more—the Russians a
working towards a detente at the moment, anyway, to take more of the stuffing out of NATO, so the
wouldn’t use his sort anyway. And—Jesus Christ!—the Englishman’s got his family with him! It ju
adds up to a big zero.” He turned at last towards Boselli, but with offensive courtesy. “Of cours
Signor Boselli may have other ideas, I’ve no doubt...”

The lump of hatred came back so fiercely, so suddenly, that Boselli felt the sweat start on h
forehead in spite of the air conditioning.

“As a matter of fact, I have,” he heard himself say in the far-off distance.

There was a ringing silence in the room, as though even the distant hum of the city had been still
by his words.

But what ideas? he thought wildly.

Only that the bullying swine had pinched his words, just as he had stolen his information, and th
he couldn’t—*wouldn’t*—agree with him under any circumstances!

But he couldn’t say that.

The General was looking at him expectantly, though: he had to say something.

And something which made sense!

“It’s hot in here,” he said involuntarily, wiping his forehead with the silk handkerchief.

“Is that an idea?” asked Villari.

An idea?

“Yes, it is,” said Boselli suddenly, plucking his line of argument out of space. “This is always th
hottest time of year—and the newspapers said yesterday that this is the hottest end of July we’ve h
since 1794.”

“That’s right,” the General nodded at him, interested curiosity written in his frown. “I read th

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