

I

It was a perfectly ordinary Friday afternoon in tropical Panama until Andrew Osnard barged into Harry Pendel's shop asking to be measured for a suit. When he barged in, Pendel was one person. By the time he barged out again Pendel was another. Total time elapsed: seventy-seven minutes according to the mahogany-cased clock by Samuel Collier of Eccles, one of the many historic features of the house of Pendel & Braithwaite Co., Limitada, Tailors to Royalty, formerly of Savile Row, London and presently of the Vía España, Panama City.

Or just off it. As near to the España as made no difference. And P & B for short.

The day began prompt at six when Pendel woke with a jolt to the din of bandsaws and building work and traffic in the valley and the sturdy male voice of Armed Forces Radio. 'I wasn't there, it was two other blokes, she hit me first and it was with her consent, Your Honour,' he informed the morning, because he had a sense of impending punishment but couldn't place it. Then he remembered his eight-thirty appointment with his bank manager and sprang out of bed at the same moment that his wife Louisa howled 'No, no, *no*,' and pulled the sheet over her head because mornings were her worst time.

'Why not "yes, yes, yes," for a change?' he asked her in the

mirror while he waited for the tap to run hot. 'Let's have a bit of optimism round the place, shall we, Lou?'

Louisa groaned but her corpse under the sheet didn't stir so Pendel amused himself with a game of cocky repartee with the news reader in order to lift his spirits.

'The Commander in charge of US Southern Command last night again insisted that the United States will honour its treaty obligations to Panama, both in the principle and in the deed,' the news reader proclaimed with male majesty.

'It's a con, darling,' Pendel retorted lathering soap onto his face. 'If it wasn't a con you wouldn't go on saying it, would you, General?'

'The Panamanian President has today arrived in Hong Kong for the start of his two-week tour of South-East Asian capitals,' said the news reader.

'Here we go, here's your boss!' Pendel called, and held out a soapy hand to command her attention.

'He is accompanied by a team of the country's economic and trade experts, including his Forward Planning advisor on the Panama Canal, Dr Ernesto Delgado.'

'Well done, Ernie,' said Pendel approvingly, with an eye to his recumbent wife.

'On Monday the presidential party will continue to Tokyo for substantive talks aimed at increasing Japanese investment in Panama,' said the news reader.

'And those geishas aren't going to know what hit them,' said Pendel in a lower tone, as he shaved his left cheek. 'Not with our Ernie on the prowl.'

Louisa woke up with a crash.

'Harry, I do not wish you to speak of Ernesto in those terms even in jest, please.'

'No, dear. Very sorry, dear. It shall not happen again. Ever.'

he promised while he navigated the difficult bit just under the nostrils.

But Louisa was not appeased.

‘Why can’t Panama invest in Panama?’ she complained, sweeping aside the sheet and sitting bolt upright in the white linen nightdress she had inherited from her mother. ‘Why do we have to have *Asians* do it? We’re rich enough. We’ve got one hundred and seven banks in this town *alone*, don’t we? Why can’t we use our own drug money to build our own factories and schools and hospitals?’

The ‘we’ was not literal. Louisa was a Zonian, raised in the Canal Zone in the days when by extortionate treaty it was United States territory for ever, even if the territory was only ten miles wide and fifty miles long and surrounded by despised Panamanians. Her late father was an Army engineer who, having been seconded to the Canal, took early retirement to become a servant of the Canal Company. Her late mother was a libertarian Bible teacher in one of the Zone’s segregated schools.

‘You know what they say, dear,’ Pendel replied, holding up an earlobe and shaving beneath it. He shaved as others might paint, loving his bottles and brushes. ‘Panama’s not a country, it’s a casino. And we know the boys who run it. You work for one of them, don’t you?’

He had done it again. When his conscience was bad he couldn’t help himself any more than Louisa could help rising.

‘No, Harry, I do not. I work for Ernesto Delgado and Ernesto is not one of *them*. Ernesto is a straight arrow, he has ideals, he cherishes Panama’s future as a free and sovereign state in the community of nations. Unlike *them* he is not on the take, he is not carpetbagging his country’s inheritance. That makes him very special and very, very rare.’

Secretly ashamed of himself, Pendel turned on the shower and tested the water with his hand.

'Pressure's down again,' he said brightly. 'Serves us right for living on a hill.'

Louisa got out of bed and yanked her nightdress over her head. She was tall and long-waisted, with dark tough hair and the high breasts of a sportswoman. When she forgot herself she was beautiful. But when she remembered herself again, she stooped her shoulders and looked glum.

'Just one good man, Harry,' she persisted as she rammed her hair inside her showercap. 'That's all it takes to make this country work. One good man of Ernesto's calibre. Not another orator, not another egomaniac, just one good Christian ethical man is all it takes. One decent capable administrator who is not corrupt, who can fix the roads and the drains and the poverty and the crime and the drugs and preserve the Canal and not sell it to the highest bidder. Ernesto sincerely wishes to be that person. It does not behove you or anybody else to speak ill of him.'

Dressing quickly, though with his customary care, Pendel hastened to the kitchen. The Pendels, like everyone else who was middle-class in Panama, kept a string of servants, but an unspoken puritanism dictated that the master of the family make breakfast. Poached egg on toast for Mark, bagel and cream cheese for Hannah. And passages by heart from *The Mikado* quite pleasantly sung because Pendel loved his music. Mark was dressed and doing his homework at the kitchen table. Hannah had to be coaxed from the bathroom where she was worrying about a blemish on her nose.

Then a helter-skelter of recrimination and farewells as Louisa, dressed but late for work at the Panama Canal Commission Administration Building, leaps for her Peugeot and

Pendel and the kids take to the Toyota and set off on the school rat-run, left, right, left down the steep hillside to the main road, Hannah eating her bagel and Mark wrestling with homework in the bouncing four-track and Pendel saying sorry about the rush today, gang, I've got a bit of an early pow-wow with the money-boys, and privately wishing he hadn't been cheap about Delgado.

Then a spurt on the wrong carriageway, courtesy of the morning *operativo* that allows city-bound commuters to use both lanes. Then a life-and-death scramble through charging traffic into small roads again, past North American-style houses very like their own to the glass-and-plastic village with its Charlie Pops and McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken and the funfair where Mark had his arm broken by an enemy bumper car last Fourth of July, and when they got to the hospital it was full of kids with firework burns.

Then pandemonium while Pendel rummages for a spare quarter to give the black boy selling roses at the lights, then wild waving from all three of them for the old man who's been standing at the same street corner for the last six months offering the same rocking-chair at two hundred and fifty dollars written on a placard round his neck. Side roads again, it's Mark's turn to be dropped first, join the stinking inferno of Manuel Espinosa Batista, pass the National University, sneak a wistful glance at leggy girls with white shirts and books under their arms, acknowledge the wedding-cake glory of the del Carmen Church – good morning, God – take your life in your hands across the Vía España, duck into the Avenida Federico Boyd with a sigh of relief, duck again into Vía Israel onto San Francisco, go with the flow to Paitilla airport, good morning again to the ladies and gentlemen of the drugs trade who account largely for the rows of pretty private aeroplanes parked

among the trash, crumbling buildings, stray dogs and chickens, but rein back now, a little caution, please, breathe out, the rash of anti-Jewish bombings in Latin America has not passed unnoticed: those hard-faced young men at the gate of the Albert Einstein mean business, so watch your manners. Mark hops out, early for once, Hannah yells, 'Forgot this, goofy!' and chucks his satchel after him. Mark strides off, no demonstrations of affection allowed, not even a flap of the hand lest it be misinterpreted by his peers as wistful longing.

Then back into the fray, the frustrated shriek of police sirens, the grunt and grind of bulldozers and power drills, all the mindless hooting, farting and protesting of a third world tropical city that can't wait to choke itself to death, back to the beggars and cripples and the sellers of hand towels, flowers, drinking mugs and cookies, crowding you at every traffic light – Hannah, get your window down and where's that tin of half-balboas? – today it's the turn of the legless white-haired senator paddling himself in his dog cart, and after him the beautiful black mother with her happy baby on her hip, fifty cents for the mother and a wave for the baby and here comes the weeping boy on crutches again, one leg bent under him like an over-ripe banana, does he weep all day or only in the rush hour? Hannah gives him a half-balboa as well.

Then clear water for a moment as we race on up the hill at full speed to the María Inmaculada with its powdery-faced nuns fussing around the yellow school buses in the forecourt – *Señor Pendel, buenos dias!* and *Buenos dias* to you, Sister Piedad! And to you too, Sister Imelda! – and has Hannah remembered her collection money for whichever saint it is today? No, she's goofy too, so here's five bucks, darling, you've got plenty of time and have a great day. Hannah who is plump gives her father a pulpy kiss and wanders off in search of Sarah who is

this week's soulmate while a smiling very fat policeman with a gold wristwatch looks on like Father Christmas.

And nobody makes anything of it, Pendel thinks in near contentment as he watches her disappear into the crowd. Not the kids, not anyone. Not even me. One Jewish boy except he's not, one Catholic girl except she's not either, and for all of us it's normal. And sorry I was rude about the peerless Ernesto Delgado, dear, but it's not my day for being a good boy.

After which, in the sweetness of his own company, Pendel rejoins the highway and switches on his Mozart. And at once his awareness sharpens, as it tends to as soon as he is alone. Out of habit he makes sure his doors are locked and keeps half an eye for traffic muggers, cops and other dangerous characters. But he isn't worried. For a few months after the US invasion gunmen ruled Panama in peace. Today if anybody pulled a gun in a traffic jam he would be met with a fusillade from every car but Pendel's.

A scorching sun leaps at him from behind yet another half-built highrise, shadows blacken, the clatter of the city thickens. Rainbow washing appears amid the darkness of the rickety tenements of the narrow streets he must negotiate. The faces on the pavement are African, Indian, Chinese and every mixture in between. Panama boasts as many varieties of human being as birds, a thing that daily gladdens the hybrid Pendel's heart. Some were descended from slaves, others might as well have been, for their forefathers had been shipped here in their tens of thousands to work and sometimes die for the Canal.

The road opens. Low tide and low lighting on the Pacific. The dark grey islands across the bay are like far-off Chinese mountains suspended in the dusky mist. Pendel has a great wish to go to them. Perhaps that's Louisa's fault because sometimes

her strident insecurity wears him out. Or perhaps it's because he can already see straight ahead of him the raw red tip of the bank's skyscraper jostling for who's-longest among its equally hideous fellows. A dozen ships float in ghostly line above the invisible horizon, burning up dead time while they wait to enter the Canal. In a leap of empathy Pendel endures the tedium of life on board. He is sweltering on the motionless deck, he is lying in a stinking cabin full of foreign bodies and oil fumes. No more dead time for me, thank you, he promises himself with a shudder. Never again. For the rest of his natural life, Harry Pendel will relish every hour of every day and that's official. Ask Uncle Benny, alive or dead.

Entering the stately Avenida Balboa he has the sensation of becoming airborne. To his right the United States Embassy rolls by, larger than the Presidential Palace, larger even than his bank. But not, at this moment, larger than Louisa. I'm too grandiose, he explains to her as he descends into the bank's forecourt. If I wasn't so grandiose in my head I'd never be in the mess I'm in now, I'd never have seen myself as a landed baron and I'd never be owing a mint I haven't got and I'd stop sniping at Ernie Delgado and anybody else you happen to regard as Mister Morally Impeccable. Reluctantly he switches off his Mozart, reaches into the back of the car, removes his jacket from its hanger – he has selected dark blue – slips it on and adjusts his Denman & Goddard tie in the driving mirror. A stern boy in uniform guards the great glass entrance. He nurses a pump-action shotgun and salutes everyone who wears a suit.

'Don Eduardo, Monseñor, how are *we* today, sir?' Pendel cries in English, flinging up an arm. The boy beams in delight.

'Good morning, Mr Pendel,' he replies. It's all the English he knows.

For a tailor Harry Pendel is unexpectedly physical. Perhaps he is aware of this because he walks with an air of power restrained. He is broad as well as tall with grizzled hair cropped short. He has a heavy chest and the thick sloped shoulders of a boxer. Yet his walk is statesmanlike and disciplined. His hands, at first curled lightly at his sides, link themselves primly behind the sturdy back. It is a walk to inspect a guard of honour or face assassination with dignity. In his imagination Pendel has done both. One vent in the back of the jacket is all he allows. He calls it Braithwaite's Law.

But it was in the face which at forty he deserved that the zest and pleasure of the man were most apparent. An unrepentant innocence shone from his baby-blue eyes. His mouth, even in repose, gave out a warm and unobstructed smile. To catch sight of it unexpectedly was to feel a little better.

Great Men in Panama have gorgeous black secretaries in prim blue bus-conductress uniforms. They have panelled, steel-lined bulletproof doors of rainforest teak with brass handles you can't turn because the doors are worked on buzzers from within so that Great Men can't be kidnapped. Ramón Rudd's room was huge and modern and sixteen floors up with tinted windows from floor to ceiling looking onto the bay and a desk the size of a tennis court and Ramón Rudd clinging to the far end of it like a very small rat clinging to a very big raft. He was chubby as well as short, with a dark blue jaw and slicked dark hair with blue-black sideburns and greedy bright eyes. For practice he insisted on speaking English, mainly through the nose. He had paid large sums to research his genealogy and claimed to be descended from Scottish adventurers left stranded by the Darién disaster. Six weeks ago he had ordered a kilt in the Rudd tartan so that he could take part in Scottish

dancing at the Club Unión. Ramón Rudd owed Pendel ten thousand dollars for five suits. Pendel owed Rudd a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. As a gesture Ramón was adding the unpaid interest to the capital which was why the capital was growing.

‘Peppermint?’ Rudd enquired, pushing at a brass tray of wrapped green sweets.

‘Thank you, Ramón,’ Pendel said, but didn’t take one. Ramón helped himself.

‘Why are you paying a *lawyer* so much money?’ Rudd asked after a two-minute silence in which he sucked his peppermint and they separately grieved over the rice farm’s latest account sheets.

‘He said he was going to bribe the judge, Ramón,’ Pendel explained with the humility of a culprit giving evidence. ‘He said they were friends. He said he’d rather keep me out of it.’

‘But why did the judge postpone the hearing if your lawyer bribed him?’ Rudd reasoned. ‘Why did he not award the water to you as he promised?’

‘It was a different judge by then, Ramón. A new judge was appointed after the election and the bribe wasn’t transferable from the old one to the new one, you see. Now the new judge is marking time to see which side comes up with the best offer. The clerk says the new judge has got more integrity than the old one, so naturally he’s more expensive. Scruples are expensive in Panama, he says. And it’s getting worse.’

Ramón Rudd took off his spectacles and breathed on them, then polished each lens in turn with a piece of chamois leather from the top pocket of his Pendel & Braithwaite suit. Then settled the gold loops behind his shiny little ears.

‘Why don’t you bribe someone at the Ministry of Agricultural Development?’ he suggested, with a superior forbearance.

‘We did try, Ramón, but they’re high-minded, you see. They say the other side has already bribed them and it wouldn’t be ethical for them to switch allegiance.’

‘Couldn’t your farm manager arrange something? You pay him a big salary. Why doesn’t he involve himself?’

‘Well now, Angel’s a bit lapsadaisy, frankly, Ramón,’ said Pendel, who sometimes chose unconsciously to improve on the English language. ‘I think he may be more use not being there, not to put too fine a point on it. I’m going to have to screw myself up to say something, if I’m not mistaken.’

Ramón Rudd’s jacket was still pinching him under the arm-pits. They stood at the big window face-to-face while he folded his arms across his chest, then lowered them to his sides, then linked his hands behind his back while Pendel attentively tugged with his fingertips at the seams, waiting like a doctor to know what hurt.

‘It’s only a tad, Ramón, if it’s anything at all,’ he pronounced at last. ‘I’m not unpicking the sleeves unnecessarily because it’s bad for the jacket. But if you drop it in next time we’ll see.’

They sat down again.

‘Is the farm producing any rice?’ Rudd asked.

‘A little, Ramón, I’ll put it that way. We’re competing with the globalisation, I’m told, which is the cheap rice that’s imported from other countries where there’s subsidisation from the government. I was hasty. We both were.’

‘You and Louisa?’

‘Well, you and me, really, Ramón.’

Ramón Rudd frowned and looked at his watch, which was what he did with clients who had no money.

‘It’s a pity you didn’t make the farm a separate company while you had the chance, Harry. Pledging a good shop as

surety for a rice farm that has run out of water makes no sense at all.'

'But Ramón – it was what you insisted on at the time,' Pendel objected. But his shame already undermined his indignation. 'You said that unless we jointly accounted the businesses you couldn't take the risk on the rice farm. That was a condition of the loan. All right, it was my fault, I should never have listened to you. But I did. I think you were representing the bank that day, not Harry Pendel.'

They talked racehorses. Ramón owned a couple. They talked property. Ramón owned a chunk of coast on the Atlantic side. Maybe Harry would drive out one weekend, buy a plot perhaps, even if he didn't build on it for a year or two, Ramón's bank would provide a mortgage. But Ramón didn't say bring Louisa and the kids although Ramón's daughter went to the *María Inmaculada* and the two girls were friendly. Neither, to Pendel's immense relief, did he find it appropriate to refer to the two hundred thousand dollars Louisa had inherited from her late father and handed to Pendel to invest in something sound.

'Have you been trying to shift your account to a different bank?' Ramón Rudd asked, when everything unsayable had been left thoroughly unsaid.

'I don't think there's a lot would have me at this particular moment, Ramón. Why?'

'One of the merchant banks called me. Wanted to know all about you. Your credit-standing, commitments, turnover. A lot of things I don't tell anybody. Naturally.'

'They're daft. They're talking about someone else. What merchant bank was that?'

'A British one. From London.'

'From *London*? They called *you*? About *me*? Who? Which one? I thought they were all broke.'

Ramón Rudd regretted he could not be more precise. He had told them nothing, naturally. Inducements didn't interest him.

'What inducements, for Heaven's sake?' Pendel exclaimed.

But Rudd seemed almost to have forgotten them. Introductions, he said vaguely. Recommendations. It was immaterial. Harry was a friend.

'I've been thinking about a blazer,' Ramón Rudd said as they shook hands. 'Navy blue.'

'This sort of blue?'

'Darker. Double-breasted. Brass buttons. Scottish ones.'

So Pendel in another gush of gratitude told him about this fabulous new line of buttons he'd got hold of from the London Badge & Button Company.

'They could do your family coat-of-arms for you, Ramón. I'm seeing a thistle. They could do you the cufflinks too.'

Ramón said he'd think about it. The day being Friday, they wished each other a nice weekend. And why not? It was still an ordinary day in tropical Panama. A few clouds on his personal horizon perhaps but nothing Pendel hadn't coped with in his time. A fancy London bank had telephoned Ramón – or there again, maybe it hadn't. Ramón was a nice enough fellow in his way, a valued customer when he paid, and they'd downed a few jars together. But you'd have to have a doctorate in extrasensory perception to know what was going on inside that Spanish-Scottish head of his.

To arrive in his little side street is for Harry Pendel a coming into harbour every time. On some days he may tease himself with the notion that the shop has vanished, been stolen, wiped out by a bomb. Or it was never there in the first place, it was one of his fantasies, something put in his imagination by his

late Uncle Benny. But today his visit to the bank has unsettled him and his eye hunts out the shop and fixes on it the moment he enters the shadow of the tall trees. You're a real house, he tells the rusty-pink Spanish roof-tiles winking at him through the foliage. You're not a shop at all. You're the kind of house an orphan dreams of all his life. If only Uncle Benny could see you now:

'Notice the flower-strewn porch there?' Pendel asks Benny with a nudge, 'inviting you to come inside where it's nice and cool and you'll be looked after like a pasha?'

'Harry boy, it's the maximum,' Uncle Benny replies, touching the brim of his black Homburg hat with both his palms at once which was what he did when he had something cooking. 'A shop like that, you can charge a pound for coming through the door.'

'And the painted sign, Benny? P & B scrolled together in a crest, which is what gives the shop its name up and down the town, whether you're in the Club Unión or the Legislative Assembly or the Palace of Herons itself? "Been to P & B lately? – There goes old so-and-so in his P & B suit." That's the way they talk round here, Benny!'

'I've said it before, Harry boy, I'll say it again. You've got the fluence. You've got the rock of eye. Who gave it you I'll always wonder.'

His courage near enough restored, and Ramón Rudd near enough forgotten, Harry Pendel mounts the steps to start his working day.

Osnard's phone call, when it came around ten-thirty, caused not a ripple. He was a new customer and new customers by definition must be put through to Señor Harry or, if he was tied up, invited to leave their number so that Señor Harry could call them back immediately.

Pendel was in his cutting room, shaping patterns out of brown paper for a naval uniform to the strains of Gustav Mahler. The cutting room was his sanctuary and he shared it with no man. The key lived in his waistcoat pocket. Sometimes for the luxury of what the key meant to him he would slip it in the lock and turn it against the world as proof he was his own master. And sometimes before unlocking the door again he would stand for a second with his head bowed and his feet together in an attitude of submission before resuming his good day. Nobody saw him do this except the part of him that played spectator to his more theatrical actions.

Behind him in rooms equally tall, under bright new lighting and electric punkahs, his pampered workers of all races sewed and ironed and chattered with a liberty not customarily granted to Panama's toiling classes. But none toiled with more dedication than their employer Pendel as he paused to catch a wave of Mahler then deftly closed the shears along the yellow chalk-curve that defined the back and shoulders of a

Colombian Admiral of the Fleet who wished only to exceed in fineness his disgraced predecessor.

The uniform Pendel had designed for him was particularly splendid. The white breeches, already entrusted to his Italian trouser-makers ensconced a few doors down the corridor behind him, were to be fitted flush against the seat, suitable for standing but not sitting. The tailcoat which Pendel was this minute cutting was white and navy blue with gold epaulettes and braid cuffs, gold frogging and a high Nelsonian collar crusted with oak leaves round ships' anchors – an imaginative touch of Pendel's own that had pleased the Admiral's private secretary when Pendel faxed the drawing to him. Pendel had never entirely understood what Benny meant by rock of eye, but when he looked at that drawing he knew he had it.

And as he went on cutting to the music his back began to arch in empathy until he became Admiral Pendel descending a great staircase for his inaugural ball. Such harmless imaginings in no way impaired his tailor's skills. Your ideal cutter, he liked to maintain – with acknowledgements to his late partner Braithwaite – is your born impersonator. His job is to place himself in the clothes of whoever he is cutting for and become that person until the rightful owner claims them.

It was in this happy state of transference that Pendel received Osnard's call. First Marta came on the line. Marta was his receptionist, telephonist, accountant and sandwich-maker, a dour, loyal, half-black little creature with a scarred, lopsided face blotched by skin grafts and bad surgery.

'Good morning,' she said in Spanish, in her beautiful voice.

Not 'Harry', not 'Señor Pendel' – she never did. Just good morning in the voice of an angel, because her voice and eyes were the two parts of her face that had survived unscathed.

‘And good morning to you, Marta.’

‘I’ve got a new customer on the line.’

‘From which side of the bridge?’

This was a running joke they had.

‘Your side. He’s an Osnard.’

‘A *what?*’

‘Señor Osnard. He’s English. He makes jokes.’

‘What sort of jokes?’

‘You tell me.’

Setting aside his shears, Pendel turned Mahler down to nearly nothing and slid an appointments book and a pencil towards himself in that order. At his cutting table, it was known of him, he was a stickler for precision: cloth here, patterns there, invoices and order book over there, everything ship-shape. To cut he had donned as usual a black silk-backed waistcoat with a fly front of his own design and making. He liked the air of service it conveyed.

‘So now how are we spelling that, sir?’ he enquired cheerily when Osnard gave his name again.

A smile got into Pendel’s voice when he spoke into the telephone. Total strangers had an immediate feeling of talking to somebody they liked. But Osnard was possessed of the same infectious gift, apparently, because a merriment quickly developed between them which afterwards accounted for the length and ease of their very English conversation.

‘It’s O-S-N at the beginning and A-R-D at the end,’ said Osnard, and something in the way he said it must have struck Pendel as particularly witty because he wrote the name down as Osnard dictated it, in three-letter groups of capitals with an ampersand between.

‘You Pendel or Braithwaite, by the by?’ Osnard asked.

To which Pendel, as often when faced with this question,

replied, with a lavishness appropriate to both identities: 'Well, sir, in a manner of speaking, I'm the two in one. My partner Braithwaite, I'm sad to tell you, has been dead and gone these many years. However, I *can* assure you that his standards are very much alive and well *and* observed by the house to this day, which is a joy to all who knew him.'

Pendel's sentences when he was pulling out the stops of his professional identity had the vigour of a man returning to the known world after long exile. Also they possessed more bits than you expected, particularly at the tail end, rather like a passage of concert music which the audience keeps expecting to finish and it won't.

'Sorry to hear that,' Osnard replied dropping his tone respectfully after a little pause. 'What d'he die of?'

And Pendel said to himself: funny how many ask that, but it's natural when you remember that it comes to all of us sooner or later.

'Well they did *call* it a stroke, Mr Osnard,' he replied in the bold tone that healthy men adopt for talking of such matters. 'But myself, if I'm honest, I tend to call it a broken heart brought on by the tragic closing down of our Savile Row premises as a consequence of the punitive taxation. Are we resident here in Panama, Mr Osnard, may I ask without being impertinent, or are we merely passing through?'

'Hit town couple o'days ago. Expect to be here quite a while.'

'Then welcome to Panama, sir, and may I possibly have a contact number for you in case we get cut off which I'm afraid is quite a usual event in these parts?'

Both men, as Englishmen, were branded on the tongue. To an Osnard, Pendel's origins were as unmistakable as his aspirations to escape them. His voice for all its mellowness had never lost the stain of Leman Street in the East End of London. If

he got his vowels right, cadence and hiatus let him down. And even if everything was right, he could be a mite ambitious with his vocabulary. To a Pendel, on the other hand, Osnard had the slur of the rude and privileged who ignored Uncle Benny's bills. But as the two men talked and listened to each other it seemed to Pendel that an agreeable complicity formed between them, as between two exiles, whereby each man gladly set aside his prejudices in favour of a common bond.

'Staying at the El Panama till my apartment's ready,' Osnard explained. 'Place was *supposed* to have been ready a month ago.'

'Always the way, Mr Osnard. Builders the world over. I've said it many times and I'll say it again. You can be in Timbuctoo or New York City, I don't care where you are. There's no worse trade for inefficiency than a builder's.'

'And you're quietish round five, are you? Not going to be a big stampede around five?'

'Five o'clock is our happy hour, Mr Osnard. My lunch-time gentlemen are safely back at work and what I call my pre-prandials have not yet come out to play.' He checked himself with a self-deprecatory laugh. 'There you are. I'm a liar. It's a Friday so my pre-prandials go home to their wives. At five o'clock I shall be delighted to offer you my full attention.'

'You personally? In the flesh? Lot o' you posh tailors hire flunkies to do their hard work for 'em.'

'I'm your old-fashioned sort, I'm afraid, Mr Osnard. Every customer is a challenge to me. I measure, I cut, I fit, and I never mind how many fittings it takes me to produce the best. No part of any suit leaves these premises while it's being made and I supervise every stage of the making as it goes along.'

'Okay. How much?' Osnard demanded. But playfully, not offensively.

Pendel's good smile widened. If he had been speaking Spanish, which had become his second soul and his preferred one, he would have had no difficulty answering the question. Nobody in Panama is embarrassed about money unless he has run out of it. But your English upper classes were notoriously unpredictable where money was concerned, the richest often being the thriftiest.

'I provide the best, Mr Osnard. Rolls-Royces don't come free, I always say, and nor does a Pendel & Braithwaite.'

'So how much?'

'Well, sir, two and a half thousand dollars for your standard two-piece is about normal, though it could be more depending on cloth and style. A jacket or blazer fifteen hundred, waistcoat six hundred. And since we tend to use the lighter materials, and accordingly recommend a second pair of trousers to match, a special price of eight hundred for the second pair. Is this a shocked silence I'm hearing, Mr Osnard?'

'Thought the going rate was two grand a pop.'

'And so it was, sir, until three years ago. Since when, alas, the dollar's gone through the floor, while we at P & B have been obliged to continue buying the very finest materials, which I need hardly tell you is what we use throughout, ir- regardless of cost, many of them from Europe, and all of them –' He was going to come out with something fancy like 'hard-currency-related' but changed his mind. 'Though I am *told*, sir, that your top-class off-the-peg these days – I'll take Ralph Lauren as a benchmark – is pushing the two thousand and in some cases going beyond even that. May I also point out that we provide aftercare, sir? I don't think you can go back to your average haberdasher and tell him you're a bit tight round the shoulders, can you? Not for free you can't. What was it we were thinking of having made exactly?'

‘Me? Oh, usual sort of thing. Start with a couple o’ lounge suits, see how they go. After that it’s the full Monty.’

‘*The full Monty*,’ Pendel repeated in awe, as memories of Uncle Benny nearly drowned him. ‘It must be twenty years since I heard that expression, Mr Osnard. Bless my soul. The full Monty. My goodness me.’

Here again, any other tailor might reasonably have contained his enthusiasm and returned to his naval uniform. And so on any other day might Pendel. An appointment had been made, the price acknowledged, social preliminaries exchanged. But Pendel was enjoying himself. His visit to the bank had left him feeling lonely. He had few English customers and fewer English friends. Louisa, guided by her late father’s ghost, did not encourage them.

‘And P & B are still the only show in town, that right?’ Osnard was asking. ‘Tailors to Panama’s best and brightest fatcats and so forth?’

Pendel smiled at fatcat. ‘We like to think so, sir. We’re not complacent but we’re proud of our achievements. It wasn’t all roses these last ten years, I can assure you. There’s not a lot of *taste* in Panama to be frank. Or there wasn’t until we came along. We had to educate them before we could sell to them. All that money for a suit? They thought we were mad or worse. Then gradually it took on till there was no stopping it, I’m pleased to say. They began to understand we don’t just throw a suit at them and ask for the money, we provide maintenance, we alter, we’re always there when they come back, we’re friends and supporters, we’re human beings. You’re not a gentleman of the press by any chance, are you, sir? We were rather tickled recently by an article that appeared in our local edition of the *Miami Herald*, I don’t know whether it chanced to catch your eye.’

‘Must have missed it.’

‘Well, let me put it this way, Mr Osnard. I’ll be serious, if you don’t mind. We dress presidents, lawyers, bankers, bishops, members of legislative assemblies, generals and admirals. We dress whoever appreciates a bespoke suit and can pay for it irregardless of colour, creed or reputation. How does that sound?’

‘Promising, actually. Very promising. Five o’clock, then. Happy hour. Osnard.’

‘Five o’clock it is, Mr Osnard. I look forward to it.’

‘Makes two of us.’

‘Another fine new customer then, Marta,’ Pendel told her when she came in with some bills.

But nothing he ever said to Marta was quite natural. Neither was the way she heard him: mauled head cocked away from him, the wise dark eyes on something else, curtains of black hair to hide the worst of her.

And that was that. Vain fool that he afterwards called himself, Pendel was amused and flattered. This Osnard was evidently a card and Pendel loved a card the way Uncle Benny had, and the Brits, whatever Louisa and her late father might say about them, made better cards than most. Perhaps after all these years of turning his back on the old country it wasn’t such a bad place after all. He made nothing of Osnard’s reticence about the nature of his business. A lot of his customers were reticent, other should have been who weren’t. He was amused, he was not prescient. And on putting down the telephone he went back to his Admiral’s uniform until the Happy Friday midday rush began, because that was what Friday lunchtime was called until Osnard came along and ruined the last of Pendel’s innocence.

★

And today, who should be heading the parade but the one and only Rafi Domingo himself, billed as Panama's leading play-boy, and one of Louisa's pet hates.

'Señor Domingo, sir!' – opening his arms – 'Superb to see you, and looking shamefully youthful with it, if I may say so!' – a quick lowering of the voice – 'and *may* I remind you, Rafi, that the late Mr Braithwaite's definition of our *perfect* gentleman' – deferentially pinching at the lower sleeve of Rafi's blazer – 'is a thumb-knuckle's width of shirt cuff, never more?'

After which they try on Rafi's new dinner jacket, which needs trying for no reason except to show it off to the other Friday customers who by this time have started to gather in the shop with their mobile telephones and cigarette smoke and bawdy chatter and heroic stories of deals and sexual conquests. Next in line is Aristides the *braguetazo*, which means he married for money, and is for this reason regarded by his friends as something of a male martyr. Then comes Ricardo-call-me-Ricki, who in a short but profitable reign in the upper echelons of the Ministry of Public Works awarded himself the right to build every road in Panama from now until eternity. Ricki is accompanied by Teddy, alias the Bear, Panama's most hated newspaper columnist and undoubtedly its ugliest, bringing his own lonely chill with him, but Pendel is not affected by it.

'Teddy, fabled scribe and keeper of reputations. Give life a pause, sir. Rest our weary soul.'

And hot on their heels comes Philip, sometime Health Minister under Noriega – or was it Education? 'Marta, a glass for His Excellency! And a morning suit, please, also for His Excellency – one last fitting and I think we're home.' He drops his voice. 'And my congratulations, Philip. I hear she's highly mischievous, very beautiful and adores you,' he murmurs in a graceful reference to Philip's newest *chiquilla*.

John le Carré

These and other brave men pass blithely in and out of Pendel's emporium on the last Happy Friday in human history. And Pendel, as he moves nimbly among them, laughing, selling, quoting the wise words of dear old Arthur Braithwaite, borrows their delight and honours them.

It was entirely appropriate, in Pendel's later opinion, that Osnard's arrival at P & B should have been accompanied by a clap of thunder and what Uncle Benny would have called the trimmings. It had been a sparkly Panamanian afternoon in the wet season till then with a nice splash of sunshine and two pretty girls peering into the window of Sally's Giftique across the road. And the bougainvillea in next door's garden so lovely you wanted to bite it. Then at three minutes to five – Pendel had somehow never doubted that Osnard would be punctual – along comes a brown Ford hatchback with an Avis sticker on the back window and pulls into the space reserved for customers. And this easy-going face with a cap of black hair on top of it, planted like a Hallowe'en pumpkin in the windscreen. Why on earth Pendel should have thought Hallowe'en he couldn't fathom but he thought it. It must have been the round black eyes, he told himself afterwards.

At which moment the lights go out on Panama.

And all it is, it's this one perfectly defined raincloud no bigger than Hannah's hand getting in front of the sun. And the next second it's your six-inch raindrops pumping up and down like bobbins on the front steps and the thunder and lightning setting off every car alarm in the street and the drain covers bursting their housings and slithering like discuses down the

road in the brown current and the palm fronds and trash-cans adding their unlovely contribution, and the black fellows in capes who always appear out of nowhere whenever there's a downpour, flogging you golf umbrellas through your car window or offering to push you to higher ground for a dollar so that you don't get your distributor wet.

And one of these fellows is already putting the hard word on pumpkin-face as he sits inside his car fifteen yards from the steps waiting for Armageddon to blow over. But Armageddon takes its time on account of there being very little wind. Pumpkin-face tries to ignore black fellow. Black fellow doesn't budge. Pumpkin-face relents, delves inside his jacket – he's wearing one, not usual for Panama unless you're *somebody* or a bodyguard – extracts his wallet, extracts a banknote from said wallet, restores said wallet to inside pocket left, lowers window enough for black fellow to poke broolly into car and pumpkin-face to exchange pleasantries and give him ten bucks without getting soaked. Manoeuvre completed. Note for the record: pumpkin-face speaks Spanish although he's only just arrived here.

And Pendel smiles. Actually smiles in anticipation, beyond the smile that is always written on his face.

'Younger than I thought,' he calls aloud to Marta's shapeily back as she crouches in her glass box anxiously checking through her lottery tickets for the winning numbers that she never has.

Approvingly. As if he were gazing upon extra years of selling suits to Osnard and enjoying Osnard's friendship instead of recognising him at once for what he was: a customer from hell.

And having ventured this observation to Marta and received no reply beyond an empathetic lifting of the dark head, Pendel

arranged himself, as always for a new account, in the attitude in which he wished to be discovered.

For just as life had trained him to rely on first impressions, so he set a similar value on the first impression he made on other people. Nobody, for instance, expects a tailor to be sitting down. But Pendel had long ago determined that P & B should be an oasis of tranquillity in a bustling world. Therefore he made a point of being discovered in his old porter's chair, most likely with a copy of the day-before-yesterday's *Times* spread on his lap.

And he didn't mind at all if there was a tray of tea on the table in front of him, as there was now, perched among old copies of *Illustrated London News* and *Country Life*, with a real silver teapot on it, and some nice fresh cucumber sandwiches extra thin which Marta had made to perfection in her kitchen where, at her own insistence, she was confined for the first nervous stages of any new customer's appearance lest the presence of a badly scarred woman of mixed race should prove threatening to white male Panamanian pride in the throes of self-adornment. Also she liked to read her books there, because he had finally got her studying again. Psychology and Social History and another one he always forgot. He had wanted her to do Law but she had refused point blank on the grounds that lawyers were liars.

'It is not appropriate,' she would say, in her carefully honed, ironic Spanish, 'that the daughter of a black carpenter should debase herself for money.'

There are several ways for a large-bodied young man with a blue-and-white bookmaker's broly to get out of a small car in pelting rain. Osnard's – if it was he – was ingenious but flawed. His strategy was to start opening the umbrella inside the car

and reverse buttocks-first in an ungainly crouch, at the same time whisking the broolly after and over him while opening it the rest of the way in a single triumphant flourish. But either Osnard or the broolly jammed in the doorway so that for a moment all Pendel saw of him was a broad English bum covered by brown gabardine trouser cut too deep in the crotch and a twin-vented matching jacket shot to rags by rainfire.

Ten-ounce summerweight, Pendel noted. Terylene mix, too hot for Panama by half. No wonder he wants a couple of suits in a hurry. Thirty-eight waist if a day. The broolly opened. Some don't. This one shot up like a flag of instant surrender, to descend at the same pace over the upper part of the body. Then he vanished, which was what every customer did between the carpark and the front door. He's coming up the steps, thought Pendel contentedly. And heard his footsteps above the torrent. Here he is, he's standing in the porch, I can see his shadow. Come on, silly, it's not locked. But Pendel remained seated. He had taught himself to do that. Otherwise he'd be opening and closing doors all day. Patches of sodden brown gabardine, like shards in a kaleidoscope, were appearing in the transparent half-halo of letters blazoned on the frosted glass: PENDEL & BRAITHWAITE, Panama and Savile Row since 1932. Another moment and the whole bulky apparition, crabwise and broolly first, lurched into the shop.

'Mr Osnard, I presume' – from the depths of his porter's chair – 'come in, sir. I'm Harry Pendel. Sorry about our rain. Have a cup of tea or something a little stronger.'

Appetites was his first thought. A quick brown fox's eyes. Slow body, big limbs, one of your lazy athletes. Allow plenty of spare cloth for expansion. And after that he remembered a bit of music hall banter that Uncle Benny never tired of, to the insincere outrage of Auntie Ruth:

‘Big hands, ladies, big feet, and you all know what *that* means – big gloves and big socks.’

Gentlemen entering P & B were presented with a choice. They could sit down, which was what the cosy ones did, accept a bowl of Marta’s soup or a glass of whatever, trade gossip and let the place work its balm on them before the drift to the fitting room upstairs, which took them casually past a seductive display of pattern books strewn over an applewood side-table. Or they could make a beeline for the fitting room, which is what the fidgety ones did, mostly the new accounts, barking orders to their drivers through the wood partition and making phone calls on their cellulars to mistresses and stockbrokers and generally setting out to impress with their importance. Till with time the fidgety ones became the cosy ones and were in turn replaced by brash new accounts. Pendel waited to see which of these categories Osnard would conform with. Answer, neither.

Nor did he betray any of the known symptoms of a man about to spend five thousand dollars on his appearance. He wasn’t nervous, he wasn’t cast down by insecurity or hesitation, he wasn’t brash or garrulous or over-familiar. He wasn’t guilty, but then guilt in Panama is rare. Even if you bring some with you when you come, it runs out pretty fast. He was disturbingly composed.

And what he did was, he propped himself on his dripping umbrella, with one foot forward and the other parked squarely on the doormat, which explained why the bell was still ringing in the rear corridor. But Osnard didn’t hear the bell. Or he heard it and was impervious to embarrassment. Because while it went on ringing he peered round him with a sunny expression on his face. Smiling in a recognising kind of way as if he had stumbled on a long lost friend:

The curved mahogany staircase leading to the gents' boutique on the upper gallery: my goodness me, the dear old staircase . . . The foulards, dressing gowns, monogrammed house slippers: yes, yes, I remember you well . . . The library steps artfully converted to a tie-rack: who'd have thought *that's* what they'd do with it? The wooden punkahs swinging lazily from the moulded ceiling, the bolts of cloth, the counter with its turn-of-the-century shears and brass rule set along one edge: old chums, every one . . . And finally the scuffed leather porter's chair, authenticated by local legend as Braithwaite's very own. And Pendel himself sitting in it, beaming with benign authority upon his new account.

And Osnard looking back at him – a searching, unabashed up-and-down look, beginning with Pendel's face, then descending by way of his fly-fronted waistcoat to his dark blue trousers, silk socks and black town shoes by Ducker's of Oxford, sizes six to ten available from stock upstairs. Then up again, taking all the time in the world for a second scrutiny of the face before darting away to the recesses of the shop. And the doorbell ringing on and on because of his thick hind leg planted on Pendel's coconut doormat.

'Marvellous,' he declared. 'Perfectly marvellous. Don't alter it by a brushstroke.'

'Take a seat, sir,' Pendel urged hospitably. 'Make yourself at home, Mr Osnard. Everyone's at home here or we hope they are. We get more people dropping in for a chat than what we do for suits. There's an umbrella stand beside you. Pop it in there.'

But far from popping his broly anywhere Osnard was pointing it like a wand at a framed photograph that hung centre-stage on the back wall, showing a Socratic, bespectacled

gentleman in rounded collars and black jacket frowning on a younger world.

‘And that’s *him*, is it?’

‘What’s who, sir? Where?’

‘Over there. The Great One. Arthur Braithwaite.’

‘It is indeed, sir. You have a sharp eye, if I may say so. The Great One himself, as you rightly describe him. Pictured in his prime, at the request of his highly admiring employees, and presented to him on the occasion of his sixtieth.’

Osnard leapt forward to have a closer look, and the bell at last stopped ringing. “Arthur G.,” he read aloud from the brass plate mounted on the base of the frame. “1908–1981. Founder.” Well I’m damned. Wouldn’t have recognised him. Hell did the G stand for?’

‘George,’ said Pendel, wondering why Osnard thought he should have recognised him in the first place but not going so far as to enquire.

‘Where d’he come from?’

‘Pinner,’ said Pendel.

‘I meant the picture. Did you bring it with you? Where was it?’

Pendel allowed himself a sad smile and a sigh.

‘A gift from his dear widow, Mr Osnard, shortly before she followed him. A beautiful thought that she could ill afford considering the cost of shipping all the way from England, but she would do it, irregardless. “It’s where he’d like to be,” she said, and nobody could talk her out of it. Not that they wanted to. Not if she’d set her heart on it. Who would?’

‘What was her name?’

‘Doris.’

‘Any kids?’

'I'm sorry, sir?'

'Mrs Braithwaite. Did she have children? Heirs. Descendants.'

'No, alas, their union was not blessed.'

'Still, you'd think it would be Braithwaite & Pendel, wouldn't you? Old Braithwaite, senior partner after all. Ought to be first, even if he's dead.'

Pendel was already shaking his head. 'No, sir. Not so. It was Arthur Braithwaite's express wish at the time. "Harry, my son, it's youth before age. From now on we're P & B, and that way we won't be mistaken for a certain oil company."' "

'So who are these royals you've been dressing? "Tailors to Royalty." Saw it on your sign. Busting to ask.'

Pendel allowed his smile to cool a little.

'Well, sir, I'll put it this way, and I'm afraid that's as far as I'm allowed to go, owing to laze majesty. Certain gentlemen *not* a great distance from a certain royal throne *have* seen fit to honour us in the past, and up to the present day. Alas, we are not at liberty to divulge further details.'

'Why not?'

'Partly by reason of the Guild of Tailors' code of conduct, which guarantees *every* customer his confidentiality, be he high or low. And partly I'm afraid these days for reasons of security.'

'Throne of England?'

'There you press me too hard, Mr Osnard.'

'Hell's the crest o' the Prince of Wales hanging outside for, then? Thought you were a pub for a moment.'

'Thank you, Mr Osnard. You have noticed what few have noticed here in Panama, but further than that my lips are sealed. Sit yourself down, sir. Marta's sandwiches are cucumber if you're interested. I don't know whether her renown has reached you. And there's a very nice light white I can

recommend. Chilean, which one of my customers imports and has the grace to send me a case of now and then. What can I tempt you with?’

For by now it was becoming important to Pendel that Osnard should be tempted.

Osnard had not sat down but he had accepted a sandwich. Which is to say he had helped himself to three from the plate, one to keep him going and two to balance in the ample cushions of his left palm while he stood shoulder to shoulder with Pendel at the applewood table.

‘Now these aren’t us at *all*, sir,’ Pendel confided, dismissing at one gesture a swatch of lightweight tweeds, which was what he always did. ‘Can’t be doing with these either – not for what I call the mature figure – all right for your beardless boy or your beanstalk but not for the likes of a you or a me, I’ll put it that way.’ Another flip. ‘Now we’re getting somewhere.’

‘Prime alpaca.’

‘It is indeed, sir,’ said Pendel, much surprised. ‘From the Andean Highlands of South Peru, appreciated for its soft touch and variety of natural shades, to quote *Wool Record*, if I may make so bold. Well, I’m blessed, you *are* a dark horse, Mr Osnard.’

But he only said this because your average customer didn’t know the first thing about cloth.

‘My dad’s favourite. Swore by it. Used to. Alpaca or bust.’

‘Used to, sir? Oh dear.’

‘Dead. Up there with Braithwaite.’

‘Well, all I can say is, Mr Osnard, with no disrespect intended, your esteemed father knew whereof he spoke,’ Pendel exclaimed, launching upon a favourite subject. ‘Because alpaca cloth is in my fairly informed judgment the finest lightweight

in the world bar none. Ever was and ever shall be, if you'll pardon me. You can have all your mohair-and-worsted mixes in the world, I don't care. Alpaca is dyed in the thread, hence your variety of colour, hence your richness. Alpaca is pure, it's resilient, it breathes. Your most sensitive skin is not bothered by it.' He laid a confiding finger on Osnard's upper arm. 'And what did our Savile Row tailor use it for, Mr Osnard, to his eternal and everlasting shame until the scarcity prevented him, I wonder?'

'Try me.'

'Linings,' Pendel declared with disgust. 'Common linings. Vandalism, that's what it is.'

'Old Braithwaite would have boiled over.'

'He did, sir, and I'm not ashamed to quote him. "Harry," he said to me – it took him nine years to call me Harry – "Harry, what they're doing to the alpaca, I wouldn't do to a dog." His words and I can hear them to this day.'

'Me too.'

'I beg your pardon, sir?'

If Pendel was all alertness, Osnard was the reverse. He seemed unaware of the impact of his words and was studiously turning over samples.

'I don't think I quite got your meaning there, Mr Osnard.'

'Old Braithwaite dressed m'dad. Long ago, mind. I was just a nipper.'

Pendel appeared too moved to speak. A rigidity came over him and his shoulders lifted in the manner of an old soldier at the Cenotaph. His words, when he found them, lacked breath. 'Well I never, sir. Excuse me. This is a turn-up for the book.' He rallied a little. 'It's a first, I don't mind admitting. Father to son. The two generations both, here at P & B. We've not had that, not in Panama. Not yet. Not since we left the Row.'

'Thought you'd be surprised.'

For a moment Pendel could have sworn the quick brown fox's eyes had lost their twinkle and become circular and smoky-dark, with only a splinter of light glowing in the centre of each pupil. And in his later imagination the splinter was not gold, but red. But the twinkle was quickly there again.

'Something wrong?' Osnard enquired.

'I think I was marvelling, Mr Osnard. "A defining moment" I believe is the expression these days. I must have been having one.'

'Great wheel o'time, eh?'

'Indeed, sir. The one that spins and grinds and tramples all before it, they say,' Pendel agreed, and turned back to the samples book like one who seeks consolation in labour.

But Osnard had first to eat another cucumber sandwich, which he did in one swallow, then brushed the crumbs off his palms by bringing them together in a slow slapping movement several times until he was satisfied.

There was a well-oiled procedure at P & B for the reception of new customers. Select cloth from samples book, admire same cloth in the piece – since Pendel was careful never to display a sample unless he had the cloth in stock – repair to fitting room for measurement, inspect Gentleman's Boutique and Sportsman's Corner, tour rear corridor, say hullo to Marta, open account, pay deposit unless otherwise agreed, come back in ten days for first fitting. For Osnard, however, Pendel decided on a variation. From the samples desk he marched him to the rear corridor, somewhat to the consternation of Marta who had retreated to the kitchen and was deep in a book called *Ecology on Loan*, being a history of the wholesale decimation of the jungles of South America with the hearty encouragement of the World Bank.

'Meet the real brains of P & B, Mr Osnard, though she'll kill me for saying it. Marta, shake hands with Mr Osnard. O-S-N then A-R-D. Make a card for him, dear, and mark it old customer because Mr Braithwaite made for his father. And the first name, sir?'

'Andrew,' said Osnard, and Pendel saw Marta's eyes lift to him, and study him, as if she had heard something other than his name, then turn to Pendel in enquiry.

'Andrew?' she repeated.

Pendel hastened to explain: 'Temporarily of the El Panama Hotel, Marta, but shortly to be moving, courtesy of our fabled Panamanian builders, to -?'

'Punta Paitilla.'

'Of course,' said Pendel with a pious smile, as if Osnard had ordered caviar.

And Marta, having very deliberately marked the place in her tome and pushed the tome aside, grimly noted these particulars from within the walls of her black hair.

'Hell happened to that woman?' Osnard demanded in a low voice as soon as they were safely back in the corridor.

'An accident, I'm afraid, sir. And some rather summary medical attention after it.'

'Surprised you keep her on. Must give your customers the willies.'

'Quite the reverse, I'm pleased to say, sir,' Pendel replied stoutly. 'Marta is by way of being a favourite among my customers. And her sandwiches are to die for, as they say.'

After which, to head off further questioning about Marta, and expunge her disapproval, Pendel launched himself immediately upon his standard lecture on the tagua nut, grown in the rainforest and now, he assured Osnard earnestly, recognised throughout the feeling world as an acceptable substitute for ivory.

‘My question being, Mr Osnard, what are the current uses of your tagua today?’ he demanded with even more than his customary vigour. ‘Ornamental chess sets? I’ll give you chess sets. Carved artefacts? Right, again. Our earrings, our costume jewellery, we’re getting warm – but what else? What possible other use is there which is traditional, which is totally forgotten in our modern age, and which we here at P & B have at some cost to ourselves revived for the benefit of our valued clients and the posterity of future generations?’

‘Buttons,’ Osnard suggested.

‘Answer, of course, our buttons. Thank you,’ said Pendel, drawing to a halt before another door. ‘Indian ladies,’ he warned, dropping his voice. ‘Cunas. Very sensitive, if you don’t mind.’

He knocked, opened the door, stepped reverently inside and beckoned his guest to follow. Three Indian women of indeterminate age sat stitching jackets under the beam of angled lamps.

‘Meet our finishing hands, Mr Osnard,’ he murmured, as if fearful of disturbing their concentration.

But the women did not seem half as sensitive as Pendel was, for they at once looked up cheerfully from their work and gave Osnard broad, appraising grins.

‘Our buttonhole to our tailormade suit, Mr Osnard, is as our ruby to our turban, sir,’ Pendel pronounced, still at a murmur. ‘It’s where the eye falls, it’s the detail that speaks for the whole. A good buttonhole doesn’t make a good suit. But a *bad* buttonhole makes a *bad* suit.’

‘To quote dear old Arthur Braithwaite,’ Osnard suggested, copying Pendel’s low tone.

‘Indeed, sir, yes. And your tagua button, which prior to the regrettable invention of plastic was in wide use across the

continents of America and Europe and never bettered in my opinion is, thanks to P & B, back in service as the crowning glory of our fully tailored suit.'

'That Braithwaite's idea too?'

'The concept was Braithwaite's, Mr Osnard,' said Pendel, passing the closed door of the Chinese jacket-makers and deciding for no reason except panic to leave them undisturbed. 'The putting it into effect, there I claim the credit.'

But while Pendel was at pains to keep the movement going, Osnard evidently preferred a slower pace for he had leaned a bulky arm against the wall, blocking Pendel's progress.

'Heard you dressed Noriega in his day. True?'

Pendel hesitated, and his gaze slipped instinctively down the corridor towards the door to Marta's kitchen.

'What if I did?' he said. And for a moment his face stiffened with mistrust, and his voice became sullen and toneless. 'What was I supposed to do? Put up the shutters? Go home?'

'What did you make for him?'

'The General was never what I call a natural suit-wearer, Mr Osnard. Uniforms, he could fritter away whole days pondering his variations. Boots and caps the same. But resist it how he would, there were times when he couldn't escape a suit.'

He turned, trying to will Osnard into continuing their progress down the corridor. But Osnard did not remove his arm.

'What sort o' times?'

'Well, sir, there was the occasion when the General was invited to deliver a celebrated speech at Harvard University, you may remember, even if Harvard would prefer you didn't. Quite a challenge he was. Very restless when it came to his fittings.'

'Won't be needing suits where he is now, I dare say, will he?'

'Indeed not, Mr Osnard. It's all provided, I'm told. There

was also the occasion when France awarded him its highest honour and appointed him a *Légionnaire*.'

'Hell did they give him that for?'

The lighting in the corridor was all overhead, making bullet holes of Osnard's eyes.

'A number of explanations come to mind, Mr Osnard. The most favoured is that, for a cash consideration, the General permitted the French Airforce to use Panama as a staging point when they were causing their unpopular nuclear explosions in the South Pacific.'

'Who says?'

'There was a lot of loose talk around the General sometimes. Not all his hangers-on were as discreet as he was.'

'Dress the hangers-on too?'

'And still do, sir, still do,' Pendel replied, once more his cheerful self. 'We did endure what you might call a slight low directly after the US invasion when some of the General's higher officials felt obliged to take the air abroad for a time, but they soon came back. Nobody loses his reputation in Panama, not for long, and Panamanian gentlemen don't care to spend their own money in exile. The tendency is more to recycle your politician rather than disgrace him. That way, nobody gets left out too long.'

'Weren't branded a collaborator or whatever?'

'There weren't a lot left to point the finger, frankly, Mr Osnard. I dressed the General a few times, it's true. Most of my customers did slightly more than that, didn't they?'

'What about the protest strikes? Join in?'

Another nervous glance towards the kitchen where Marta was by now presumably back at her studies.

'I'll put it this way, Mr Osnard. We closed the front of the shop. We didn't always close the back.'

‘Wise man.’

Pendel grabbed the nearest doorhandle and shoved it. Two elderly Italian trouser-makers in white aprons and gold-rimmed spectacles peered up from their labours. Osnard bestowed a royal wave on them and stepped back into the corridor. Pendel followed him.

‘Dress the new chap too, don’t you?’ Osnard asked carelessly.

‘Yes, sir, I’m proud to say, the President of the Republic of Panama numbers today among our customers. And a more agreeable gentleman you couldn’t wish to meet.’

‘Where d’you do it?’

‘I beg your pardon, sir?’

‘He come here, you go there?’

Pendel adopted a slightly superior manner. ‘The summons is always to the Palace, Mr Osnard. People go to the President. He doesn’t go to them.’

‘Know your way around up there, do you?’

‘Well, sir, he’s my third president. Bonds are formed.’

‘With his flunkeys?’

‘Yes. Them too.’

‘How about Himself? Pres?’

Pendel again paused, as he had done before when rules of professional confidence came under strain.

‘Your great statesman of today, sir, he’s under stress, he’s a lonely man, cut off from what I call the common pleasures that make our lives worth living. A few minutes alone with his tailor can be a blessed truce amid the fray.’

‘So you chat away?’

‘I would prefer the term soothing interlude. He’ll ask me what my customers are saying about him. I respond – not naming names, naturally. Occasionally, if he has something on his chest, he may favour me with a small confidence in return.’