

I

PETER COTTON's plane touched down at an airfield on the outskirts of Madrid just after 3 p.m. on 5 September 1944. It was the hottest time of a very hot day. The air felt dry enough to cure meat, was far hotter outside his lungs than in. The glare made him wince, and the heat rising back off the concrete apron made his eyes smart. At the indication of the gloved driver, he kept his hands away from the metal of the car sent to fetch him. He sat back as far as he could out of the sun, and took off his hat.

Even when the car drove off and the air buffeted his face, he did not feel cooler. His scalp prickled as drops of sweat formed. Then the sweating stopped. Cotton had been this hot before as a child of about seven years old in Mexico, when he had felt his forehead and pronounced it 'spongy'. 'Oh, you're transpiring, dear,' his mother said. 'We'll get you something to drink. But do remember to sip. Gulping is bad for you.' She had also given him a definition of transpiring. 'When you're too hot to sweat, dear, the water sort of wafts out of you. It can be rather dangerous.'

Cotton looked out. Near the airfield some effort had been made to do the French thing and have shade trees along the roadside, but a couple had been struck by

shells, several had died, and the bleached-hay colour of the drooping leaves on the survivors was due not to autumn but to drought. Past the trees, the front wheels of the car churned up dust. Cotton wound up the window, and found the glass had discoloured. It gave a rusty tinge to the dun, bare landscape round Madrid. They passed some abandoned farm buildings. One whole wall had been whitewashed and something between a shadow and a stencil applied to it: the huge, bespectacled face of a Nationalist war hero. When the car came to an old stone bridge, Cotton saw that there was no flow left in the river under it, only a straggle of disconnected pools surrounded by some prickly scrub and a few goats.

Rising from the river valley, the beginnings of Madrid itself added grey stone, cement and small red brick to the dun and rust. The Spanish Civil War had been over for five years, but there was still a lot of damage to see as they drove up the slope: some bombed-out buildings, but many more shored up and boarded up from the effects of close fighting. There were soot marks by some windows, many pits left by bullets round doors, and little sign of much repair or building except for a church being painted and the base of something new and monumental in white stone that they passed. This was the only site he saw that had workers on it, these all dressed in prisoner's grey, watched over by a couple of soldiers on foot and another on a gleaming chestnut horse with white sweat lines like a foaming contour map around the saddle.

Otherwise, even in the centre of the Spanish capital, there was little traffic and very few people about. Those who could kept to the shadows. The original Madrid, built

on a hill or escarpment in a high plain, was full of narrow, shaded, cobbled streets, but later development had been prone to avenues and some eighteenth-century rectitude. Enlightenment and Spanish sun. About a mile north of the centre, in the street called Fernando el Santo, was the British Embassy. It had been the Marquis of Álava's palace forty years before, and Cotton surprised himself by thinking of 'lion's head and paws' – his mother's description of a showpiece building with a central block and two short, forward-projecting wings – as they came through the gate. The car drew up at the main entrance. Cotton got out and narrowed his eyes against the sunlight again.

'I'll fetch your bags, sir,' said the driver.

Cotton nodded. He had not in any way expected memories of his mother. She had died in 1938, when he had been at Cambridge. He had received a second telegram from his father with news of her death before the first arrived. 'Mother gravely ill. Expect the worst.' 'How very British,' someone had said – referring, it turned out, not to his father but to the cock-up.

Cotton squinted at the sandbags and defensive positions, and followed the driver up the steps. Initially relieved to get out of the glare, his first surprise, after the almost deserted streets outside, was to see how crowded the entrance hall was. For a moment the marble floor felt beautifully cool, but almost at once Cotton heard how it contributed to the echo and hubbub of all those warming the place up. Signing in at the desk, he had to lean forward to hear what he had to do. He could hear a lot of murmured English, slightly more voluble Spanish, a couple speaking French, and then something he thought might be Polish

from a man wearing a beret and wagging his finger at a small girl dutching a doll with red spots on its cheeks.

His bags were checked in. A beefy military policeman took him down to the basement, where he had to provide identification and sign in again at another desk. He was then given an envelope and shown to a cubicle. It had a half curtain, rather like a voting booth. Inside there was a shelf, and above it a mirror.

He paused. Cotton had spent two months at Hanslope Park near Newport Pagnell studying the often dubious intelligence of various Nazi plans to smuggle the so-called Dutch gold, the gold reserves robbed when the Germans invaded Holland, to Spain. He had then been sent for a week to Camp 020 near Ham in Surrey to read the transcripts of the interrogation of Ernesto Hoppe, code name Herold, a captured German-born Argentinian, who claimed the Germans had a plan to ship the gold and 'other valuables' by submarine from Spain to Argentina. There was some doubt that Hoppe's submarine story was true, some acceptance that the Dutch gold was already in Spain. He opened the envelope and read.

P. J. B. Cotton. Code name Pedrillo. Proceed directly to Cadiz. Relieve R. A. May of his duties on arrival. Close office and return with R. A. May. Arrest if necessary.

Cotton blinked. He read his orders three times. He had flown the first part of the journey from Kent huddled by the empty bomb bay of a Lancaster. From Bordeaux he had been flown to Toulouse. From Toulouse he had been

driven to an airfield near Perpignan. And now he was being ordered to be some sort of policeman? He had been told he was to do something 'of extraordinary importance to the war effort'. He wasn't even sure if 'R. A.' were the man's initials or some rank or post he had not heard of. He considered himself in the mirror. He looked pasty and irritated.

So he closed his eyes and reconsidered. He breathed in. He was not sure where Cadiz was, except that it was on the sea somewhere in the south. He shook his head. He had no idea who R. A. May might be, what he was doing in Cadiz, or why he had to be removed.

Cotton inclined his head towards his own reflection and stepped out. The military policeman showed him into a small office. A very bald person who identified himself briskly as Naysmith asked where he was going.

'Cadiz,' said Cotton.

Naysmith grimaced. 'Oh Christ,' he said and jerked a thumb at the map of Spain behind him. Cadiz was on the far south coast of Spain, about ninety miles south of Seville, about ninety miles west of Gibraltar.

'Have you been there?' asked Cotton.

'What? No. I have not.' Naysmith was a man with books attached to his desk by string, with a stickler's ruler and a propelling pencil. 'Train then.' He began flicking at a railway timetable. 'Code book,' he said, indicating a fat brown envelope. 'Check.'

Cotton looked in. He had been given Lord Byron's *Don Juan* in London. This was an identical copy sent in the diplomatic bag.

'Check,' said Cotton.

‘Best we can do is noon tomorrow,’ said Naysmith. ‘Pick up your tickets in the morning.’ He dropped the railway timetable and picked up another guide. ‘Yes,’ he said. He double-checked. ‘Yes. Hotel Buenavista in Cadiz.’

‘Right. Where do I stay tonight?’

‘Not my department, old boy.’ Naysmith looked up. ‘Anything else?’

‘The briefing?’

Naysmith looked only momentarily surprised. ‘That’s not my pigeon,’ he said.

Cotton nodded. ‘What about cash?’

‘Cashiers’ office, upstairs. There’s a chitty with the book.’

‘Thank you.’

‘No call for that, old boy. Let’s all get on, shall we?’

Outside, Cotton saw that the military policeman had gone, but he found the cashiers’ office upstairs and handed over the flimsy note. The clerk counted out money.

‘Money belt?’

‘No.’

The clerk handed one over and took back a little of the money.

‘Sign here,’ he said.

Cotton did, and gathered up the money. One large silver coin caught his attention. He held it up. It was a five-peseta piece with the profile of a baby’s head on it.

‘That’s Alfonso XIII,’ said a voice behind him. ‘Still legal tender, of course, but rather a sad story.’

Cotton turned. A short, wide-set man wearing a dark-grey shirt, rust-coloured tie and ink-blue braces was

smiling at him. With his round glasses, he looked like a schoolmaster in a modern-languages department. He had very short, very dark hair, but with a small area, about the circumference of a quail's egg, just above and behind his left ear, that was completely white.

The man held out a hand. 'Douglas Houghton,' he said. 'Feeling lost?'

'Peter Cotton,' said Cotton. 'Obviously looking it.'

Houghton smiled. 'How long have you been here?'

'About forty-five minutes.'

'Staying long?'

'I'm off tomorrow.'

Houghton pointed down a corridor. 'Come along. I'll show you around.'

Cotton put the money in the belt, picked up his copy code book, and followed. He noticed he could barely feel his feet on the marble. They went down to the basement again and called in on an office where Houghton picked up a buff file. There were a number of people fanning themselves with whitish heart-shaped things made of some kind of woven leaf.

'Those are pay-pay,' said Houghton, as he indicated they keep going down the corridor. 'Philippines, I think. It's marginally cooler down here, but the air doesn't circulate well except in winter, and electric ceiling fans are unreliable and far too low for comfort.'

'How long have you been here?' said Cotton.

'I arrived in time for the stoning of the embassy.'

Cotton looked over at him.

Houghton smiled. 'Nineteen forty-one,' he said. 'When Franco's government simply couldn't restrain the

indignation of people in fascist shirts and brought them along by lorry. Ah, this is me.'

They turned into a narrow room with a vaulted ceiling. At the far end was a solitary window, hardly bigger than a shot-hole and barred on the outside. There were three desks in close proximity along one wall. That left only enough room for a narrow aisle and a bench on the other side.

'Sit,' said Houghton. He went behind the desk nearest the door and flicked through some papers.

'All right,' he said. 'First time in Spain?'

'Yes.'

'Mm,' said Houghton, picking up a pencil and jotting something down. 'Where's your Spanish from?'

'South America. I lived there when I was a child. Recently I had a refresher course from a Catalan lady in Oxford.'

Houghton looked up. 'That wasn't Margarita Gil, was it?'

'Gil yes, but her name was Montserrat.'

'Of course. Sisters. I can never remember which one is the elder. I met them when I was teaching there. Rather distinguished father. He's a don now, I think, at my old college.'

'You're a Hispanist?'

'Mm. Calderón de la Barca, mostly. I've always loved theatre.'

'Right,' said Cotton. He thought Calderón de la Barca might have been seventeenth century. Plays and masques. Yes, *La Vida es Sueño. Life is a Dream*. It was not a play he knew.

The phone rang. Houghton picked it up and began speaking in French. Cotton watched Houghton's voice and body change. He became loud, his face contorted, his free hand agitated. Then he put the phone down and reverted to what he was in English.

Cotton's French was that of a schoolboy, but he had understood something – 'The border is officially closed and the Pyrenees are still there. He'll have to accept that. They are the Pyrenees. Forget Chateaubriand. He'd be far better heading for Switzerland.'

'Sorry about that,' said Houghton. 'I have to make a call.'

'Of course.'

Houghton dialled. While training, an instructor had told Cotton that he might meet 'those who put the opera in "operative"'.

Houghton had another, quieter, personality for Spanish, that was for sure, but Cotton heard that he was talking about a Lieutenant Barton, for whose name he was entirely English again.

'Sorry about that,' said Houghton again. 'This department has really been reassigned, but there are still a few poor bastards wandering about Occupied Europe.'

Cotton raised his eyebrows.

'Oh, we've been getting British servicemen in and then out of Spain. About two thousand so far.'

'I see.'

Houghton smiled. 'Marie, *mi mujer*, is on the Jewish run. She's been involved in rather more than two thousand getting out through Gibraltar or Portugal.'

Mujer means both ‘woman’ and ‘wife’ in Spanish. Cotton was mildly interested that Houghton had said this in Spanish rather than English, but rather more puzzled by ‘the Jewish run’. Surely he meant ‘route’. Or did he really mean ‘run the gauntlet’? Didn’t they ‘run’ bulls at Pamplona? He closed his eyes. ‘Please remember not to run away with yourselves,’ he had heard in one class with rain rattling on the Nissen-hut roof. ‘Do remember you have to have a basis for your conjectures – and that’s usually prosaic. Agitation or nervousness or adrenalin – whatever you want to call it – has two dire effects. One is sexual. But, let’s not be prim, you all have hands. The other is mental tension. You *must* learn how to harness that. Why? To carry out whatever mission you are given *and* to save your own skins. Make the mental tension work for you. Or it will certainly work against you.’ Opening his eyes but not yet focusing, Cotton decided they were not married and that Marie was at least half-Jewish.

Then Cotton realized he was sitting on the bench, with a money belt and the envelope containing a copy of his code book on his lap, and that Houghton was looking at him as he had looked at him upstairs when Cotton had been holding the coin with the baby’s head on it. Cotton blinked. He thought he was about to black out. He put his hand to his chest and looked down. His shirt was soaked with sweat, but it felt cold.

‘Would you like some water?’ said Houghton.

‘Yes, I would, thank you.’

Houghton bent down, picked up a bottle of water, and tossed it to him. Cotton’s eyes opened wide, but he managed to catch it. He saw his hands were trembling

when he opened the bottle. He drank. He had the impossible sensation that the water was spreading through the veins on his chest.

‘So,’ said Houghton, ‘would you like to meet her?’

For a moment Cotton didn’t know who he was talking about. Marie. ‘Yes, of course.’

‘Have you anywhere to stay tonight?’

‘Not yet,’ said Cotton.

Houghton smiled. ‘I thought that,’ he said. He picked up the telephone again and called. ‘*Hola, mi amor,*’ he said, ‘*tenemos corderito para cenar. Ah, y pasará la noche.*’

Cotton blinked. Houghton had said they were having ‘lamb for supper – and to stay the night’.

Houghton listened, laughed. ‘*Hasta las ocho, mi ángel.*’ Until eight, my angel.

Cotton was not sure why, but being compared to a lamb somehow cheered him. He drank some more water. His head was thumping.

‘She’ll want all the news of home,’ said Houghton chattily.

‘Yes, of course,’ said Cotton.

‘How are you feeling?’

‘Rehydrated.’

‘Good. It takes a little time for the body to get into balance. Shall we get on then? Mm. What’s your code book?’

‘Byron’s *Don Juan.*’ Cotton was surprised to recognize only then that Houghton was the person briefing him. He drank some more water, as if his thoughts depended on it.

Houghton sighed. ‘All very literary,’ he said. ‘What did you do before?’

‘I was a soldier until fairly recently.’

‘Really?’ said Houghton. ‘Unusual. Things must be changing. We’re used to more . . . well, those of a certain louche brio. Like ex-journalists, a novelist or two, linguists, and of course the occasional wonderfully inventive operative.’

‘Ah,’ said Cotton.

Houghton smiled. ‘We had an agent, a Spaniard, who had a large group of entirely invented people the Germans believed existed. An absolutely amazing feat.’ He started getting up. ‘But now it’s less about creating confusion than clearing it up.’

‘Yes.’ Cotton got to his feet.

‘How tall are you?’

‘About six one.’

‘And do you mind telling me how old you are?’

‘No. I’m twenty-five.’

‘Really?’ said Houghton. He made a face. ‘I’m thirty-nine. Come along and I’ll let you get on. Do bring the water.’

Two doors down, they turned into a much larger room with a cross-vaulted ceiling. There were bookshelves on every wall except where there were three venerable-looking strongboxes. There were two long tables with chairs on either side. By the door were a couple of cubicles of the kind Cotton had already seen. At a desk sat a middle-aged woman.

‘Hello, Agnes,’ said Houghton. Houghton wrote some numbers on a slip of paper and gave it to her. Agnes went to one of the safes.

‘Let’s sit down,’ said Houghton.

They sat opposite each other. Houghton spoke as quietly as if in a library.

‘Geography and so on is over there,’ said Houghton, pointing. ‘Now I mustn’t be au fait with what you are doing – that’s for your chief in London – but you need to tell me your code name and any others given. You should give me my code name too.’

Cotton wrote. The code worked simply enough. Any code-breaker would need to know what book was being used. Real people were given characters’ names – for example, the Spanish leader or *caudillo*, General Francisco Franco Bahamonde, was code-named Lambro, a pirate in *Don Juan*. Cotton’s boss in London had chosen for himself the name of a girl in the Sultan’s harem, Dudù. For more security, these names were transmitted using a similar-looking but separate code based on Byron’s short poem ‘There be none of Beauty’s daughters’.

Houghton had been given the code name Baba, a eunuch. Houghton raised his eyebrows, but nodded. He took the piece of paper. ‘We’ll come for you,’ he said, and left.

Agnes brought him a file. It contained just a few sheets of paper. Almost all related to May’s job in Cadiz. As far as Cotton could tell, this involved checking all imports and exports passing through the port. The only variations in dull lists of ship names, consignment numbers, ports of origin, declared destinations and ‘nature of cargo’ were when a shipment of ‘nitrates’ or ‘agricultural machinery’ called for reaction from London. All consignment details were then sent on to agents elsewhere to cross-check.

The only other sheet of paper contained a list of messages sent to R. A. May since mid-July. 'Expenditure excessive. Justify.' This was followed by 'Send accounts forthwith' at the end of July. Then by 'Insist on full accounts immediately' at the beginning of August, and a week later by 'If clear accounts not sent by return all expenditure will be stopped.' There was then a ten-day gap before 'Accounts not clear.' The final, week-old, message was 'Stay at your post. Await instructions. Expect contact. Code name Pedrillo.'

Cotton sighed. It was like reading bank manager's letters in telegram form. He could vaguely remember the stir and subsequent hush at his father's bank when an employee in Guadalajara had 'gone off the rails' and misappropriated funds to enable the purchase of expensive presents for a young lady from a rich family. He also wondered why he had not been given May's replies. Was that deliberate or just incompetence? Or hadn't there been any? He drank some more water. What was clear to him was that his boss had known all this before sending Cotton to Spain. So what was this job? An initiation test? An apprenticeship?

He gave the file back to Agnes and went to the reference section. The item on Cadiz looked as if it had been lifted from an encyclopedia. 'Cadiz was founded by the Phoenicians some three thousand years ago as Gadir,' he read. The Romans had called the place Gades. He read on, sometimes coming across a familiar term like the Armada or an English name like the Earl of Essex or the Duke of Wellington, and little by little he finished the bottle of water.

At eight Houghton and Marie looked in. A tiny person, not five foot, and strikingly thin, she wore a dowdy brown dress but had an extraordinarily cheerful face and manner.

‘Welcome to Madrid! Did they give you one of those huge baby coins?’

Marie’s theory was that the embassy had a hoard of them left over from the First War and were now getting rid of them ‘one by one, whenever the chance presents itself’. Some people took them as a good-luck charm or talisman, some as a ‘perverse talisman’ to soak up bad luck. ‘They do have a certain weight to them.’

They signed out and left the embassy, Cotton with his suitcase and attaché case. Marie put on a brown hat and tied it in place with a chiffon scarf round her chin. Houghton took a beret out of his jacket pocket and put it on his head. He didn’t wear it to the side like a soldier, but tugged it forward as if it had a peak.

‘We’re not far,’ said Houghton. ‘We’re in Zurbarán.’ He pointed at Cotton’s suitcase. ‘Heavy?’

‘No,’ lied Cotton. He saw that the pair of them were holding hands.

‘We’ll stop off and get some things,’ said Houghton.

‘Then I’ll go on,’ said Marie, ‘and get cracking.’

‘Right you are,’ said Houghton.

Cotton was unsure about Marie’s accent. It wasn’t quite French, but it wasn’t quite English. His puzzlement must have shown.

‘Marie was brought up in Corsica and Nairn,’ said Houghton. ‘She was born in Corsica, but her father – he was a marine engineer originally – got religion when

she was about ten and took the whole family to Nairn and became a reverend. Quite big in the temperance movement.'

Cotton looked at him to see how serious he was, but Houghton's face remained straight.

They stopped at a grocer's shop. The place was like a small cave, and smelled of cheese and mould and spilled wine. They stood by the counter. After a small wait, the grocer jerked his chin at them.

'But what is it you want?' he said.

It was really the first time Cotton had heard a Spaniard speaking Spanish in Spain. The words were clear enough, but the exasperated tone – as if the grocer felt they were pestering him unconscionably – struck him as novel.

Houghton quietly ordered some chorizo, ham, grapes, coffee and bread. 'The bread's rather . . . *thin* these days,' he said. 'It doesn't have much chew. It tastes of flour, but in a dusty sort of way. Do you want anything?'

'No, thank you. Is the grocer normally this friendly?'

'Oh, that's just Madrid. I understand the Castilians could be taken as quasi-hostile even before the war.' He looked up at Cotton and smiled. 'We'll talk,' he said.

Two flights of rickety wood stairs up, Marie and Houghton's flat had one largish room overlooking the street, and directly off it were a kitchen, a bathroom and the bedroom. Through a square arch from the main room was a small area arranged as a library. Along one wall was a couch. Cotton was to sleep on that. The place was not well furnished, and some of the paint was peeling. The exiguous electric light Houghton described as 'cloudy

night, some moon – and prone to flicker’. There were candles at the ready for power cuts.

They talked and drank and ate. They gave him a soup plate of *habas*, broad beans cooked in tomato, with bits of chorizo and ham laid out round the edge. Houghton had been right about the bread. There was crust and then something that tasted as bland as cotton wool but was not so substantial. It had an almost medicinal aftertaste that Cotton could not trace. Cotton saw that Houghton used the wine like some kind of mouthwash.

Houghton and Marie tried to fill him in on Spain. Marie giggled and insisted Houghton do his imitation of Franco. Every morning, she explained, Franco would sit for breakfast and review the executions for that day.

‘There are about nine every day, and in theory he can give a pardon,’ said Houghton.

‘But he doesn’t,’ said Marie.

‘Mm,’ said Houghton. ‘He shows no emotion, but has breakfast and signs each order.’

‘Do it!’ said Marie. ‘Do it!’

Houghton assumed a face between sleepy and prim. Then in a quiet, high-pitched, bored little voice he said, ‘*Enterao.*’ He paused, mimed signing something, then picked up a crumb of bread and ate it, chewing small. He swallowed. ‘*Enterao,*’ he said again. ‘*Enterao.*’

Cotton’s eyebrows rose, partly in enquiry. *Enterao* or *enterado* means ‘seen’ or ‘understood’. Marie laughed delightedly. ‘*Y pasao por las armas.*’ She performed a little mime to show that these cases were ‘passed’ in front of a firing squad.

‘Douglas does him *igualito igualito*’ – to a tee – said Marie. ‘He really is a dull little man, but he has learned how to keep Spain in thrall. How? Would you say it was a variation of divide and rule?’

‘Well . . . ’ said Houghton.

‘He plays both sides always,’ said Marie. ‘This is a man who believes in a Judaeo-Masonic conspiracy. Who has sent trains containing some Jews at least, along with other groups, to help the German war effort. But this is also the man who has allowed Jews to escape through Gibraltar and Portugal. What kind of man is he? A hero for helping? Or part of the persecution? He always hedges his bets. It’s very simple. So far it always works. Oh, and he has handed out passports to some Jews in other countries. I think he thinks of them as his Jews.’

‘What?’

‘Sephardic Jews. The Jews expelled from Spain in 1492. Those are the only Jews he’ll save!’

Houghton smiled, but not very comfortably. Cotton liked them. To him they were middle-aged and sincere and rather touchingly demonstrative.

‘Oh,’ said Marie, ‘and nobody ever quite knows where he is. He lives in a palace removed from Madrid, has his own hospital there, and won’t appear for weeks on end. People begin to panic. Franco is dead. Franco has resigned. And then he turns up in Valencia or somewhere until the next round of rumours.’

Houghton had begun stroking her forearm. She shook her head at him, good-naturedly, and concentrated on Cotton.

‘I take it they’ve thrown you in at the deep end.’

‘Perhaps.’

‘No perhaps about it. It’s part of the preparation. I think that’s what they believe anyway. You’re on your own. The British always prefer to give you string and, when it breaks, hope you’re good at knots. The Spanish prefer intimacy to privacy. They can make you feel you’re being suffocated. You must remember that. You’re going to be quite alone, but always surrounded. You will remember that?’

‘Yes,’ said Cotton, ‘yes, I will.’ He looked up. ‘Have either of you ever been to Cadiz?’

‘No, I haven’t,’ said Houghton. ‘But the people are supposed to be rather amusing, witty. That may have been quashed, of course.’

Cotton felt grateful but tired. He finally got to his makeshift bed about two.

Around four he woke. For ventilation, his part of the flat had an internal glass window that had been opened. It gave on to Houghton and Marie’s bedroom.

He heard her say, ‘*Te necesito*,’ I need you, and a rustle or two later the squeak of springs. He pulled his pillow round his ears. Alone but in company was about right.

Houghton woke him at six. They drank coffee and ate bread from the evening before. It was already very dry.

‘I could toast it,’ said Marie.

‘Put more butter on,’ said Houghton.

Cotton washed. As he was shaving, Houghton knocked at the door.

‘Did you bring soap?’

‘Yes,’ said Cotton.

‘What kind?’

‘Pears.’

Cotton heard a sigh from Marie. Then a murmur.

‘I say,’ said Houghton, ‘you couldn’t leave it, could you?’

‘My pleasure,’ said Cotton.

He heard Marie clap her hands in delight, and smiled.

They arrived at the British Embassy a little before eight. The military policeman at the desk stood up and saluted.

‘Captain Cotton?’

‘Not any more.’

‘You’re needed urgently in Operations, sir.’

‘Go,’ said Houghton. ‘We’ll take your stuff down.’

Cotton followed the MP and saw Agnes again. She handed him an envelope and the code book.

‘Security, please,’ she said.

Cotton went into another cubicle and opened the envelope. It took him half an hour to decode:

May dead repeat dead. Likely date of death 1st September. Revised orders. Proceed to Cadiz. Secure position. Close office. D.

Cotton had not quite three and a quarter hours before his train. During this time he learned that the delay in hearing of May’s death had been caused by ‘consular channels’. In other words, the death had been belatedly reported to the embassy in Madrid by the vice-consul in Cadiz. He sent a message to D: ‘Have two hours before departure. Cause or circumstances of death?’

Shortly before he had to leave, he received a reply: 'Neither cause nor circumstances known. Situation doesn't add up. D.'

Cotton picked up his railway ticket and went to say goodbye.

'Good luck,' said Houghton. 'That business Marie told you about always being on your own?'

'Yes. No man is an island in Spain because someone will always be looking over your shoulder?'

Houghton smiled. 'Mm. It's usually true.'

'Thanks,' said Cotton. 'You've been very kind.'

Houghton shook his head. '*Suerte*,' he said in Spanish. Luck.

Cotton smiled. 'And thank Marie for me.'

'Of course.'

They shook hands. A few minutes later he was being driven to Atocha station to get the express south.