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THE SINS OF MERCATOR

A Novel

by Alan H. Gael

About 67,000 words

CHAPTER ONE
TO INTRODUCE CASSIAN KRANE

"I could liquidate half your ancestral estates before the market opens tomorrow morning," said Cassian Krane.

Of the four who heard him, none seemed quite similarly impressed.

The pale face of Stern, the financier's chief of staff, registered nothing at all. Sir Richard Carrick let contempt flare briefly in his grey eyes—only to smother it behind a cool sip of his Negroni. Tom Renwick, of *The Gleaner*, pulled down one corner of his mouth and felt the familiar discomfort of a man consorting with sources he found personally repugnant. Larkin, the stand-up comedian, softly hummed a bar of something indecent.

"Come round to my place in Park Lane," Krane continued, fixing his heavy-lidded gaze on Renwick, "and I'll show you more English nobility than you'll find at a Lords test—most of them there to talk me up at dinner."

"What's set him off?" Larkin murmured to Stern.

It was no secret that Krane—whose leveraged buyouts had toppled boards and stripped pension funds across three continents, whose invitation list was studied with the intensity of a Cabinet reshuffle—was subject to periodic eruptions of the kind now manifesting itself. He would sweep into late-night bars, seek out whoever seemed available, and perform a sort of magnificent vulgarity that suggested a man who had always wanted

to be found offensive but had only recently acquired the capital to insist on it.

"Quietly," replied Stern. "A significant transaction closed today. He will settle once he has had his audience."

"Significant as in 'Treasury Select Committee' significant?" Larkin inquired pleasantly.

Stern's expression did not change. "Mr. Krane's fund has posted exceptional returns," he said, in the measured tone of a man who has said it many times.

He turned, smoothly, as Krane called for his attention with a gesture.

"I didn't quite catch Mr. Renwick's remark," said Stern.

"I merely suggested," said Renwick, "that Mr. Krane observe the view to his right."

The others turned. Through the restaurant's floor-to-ceiling glass, the scene was one of gilded London at play: candlelit tables bright with silver and crystal, bare shoulders catching the amber light, the quiet percussive of wealth-conversation, laughter, the soft thud of a sommelier's judgment confirmed.

"I see it," growled Krane. "Nobody remarkable there."

"There is comfort there. Luxury," said Renwick.

The financier stared, not quite comprehending the distinction.

"Now look out the other way," continued Renwick.

It was a different prospect. Below, the Embankment stretched along the dark Thames: the amber chain of lamp posts, the black glitter of the water, the looming architecture of bridges.

Beneath one arch, visible even from here, a line of figures had formed up along the concrete—sleeping bags, rucksacks, the particular stillness of people waiting for the night to end.

"Every person down there," said Renwick, as the table regarded the window with varying degrees of attention, "carries a story that ends in the same place: no room for them in the parts of the city we occupy now. In what other city in the world does absolute destitution stand this close to this kind of wealth?"

There was a brief silence. Renwick was on his usual terrain, and there were few there disposed to follow him. The editorial line of *The Gleaner* is not everyone's preferred reading.

"What a load of performative nonsense," said Krane flatly. "Those people made choices. The people in this room made choices. That's the whole story."

"The distinction," interrupted Renwick, rising to it with a journalist's reflex, "is simply capital. If every person at a table in this restaurant transferred one per cent. of their weekly income to a shared fund tonight, every man and woman sleeping under that bridge would have housing and food for the next six months."

"Why would I do that?" demanded Krane.

"Because you could," said Renwick.

"Cut the editorial," said Krane. "You should put it in your newsletter where nobody reads it. Who would you even send the money to?"

"I would suggest," said Sir Richard Carrick, with a slight smile, "to Anton Mercator."

"To who?" asked Krane, with more interest than grammar.

"Anton Mercator," said Renwick. "The man who gave a hundred dollars to each of the workers laid off from Nexcore Logistics, near Detroit. That's who you mean, isn't it, Carrick?"

"Yes," assented the latter. "I was reading about it earlier today."

"It was all over the feed this morning," continued Renwick. "Three thousand workers."

"How many?" said Krane, hoarsely.

"Three thousand. Every one of them received a direct deposit of one hundred dollars on the morning after Nexcore filed for restructuring, with a text message that read, 'With the compliments of Anton Mercator.'"

"Three hundred thousand dollars!" Krane sat back, genuinely startled. "I don't believe it."

"It was confirmed by Reuters and the AP. The funds cleared."

"Then the man is insane," said Krane flatly.

"Pity he doesn't have a run at London," came Larkin's voice.

"Is it?" Krane's tone flattened. "You think that's something to joke about? A person operating that way—disrupting the understood relationship between capital and labour, publicly—that's a destabilising force. If he were allowed to operate at scale it would be damaging for everyone."

"Ah, well," said Renwick, glancing at his phone and standing up. "You may be right. I've got a piece to file. I'm off."

"Me too," said the financier thickly. "Come on, Carrick. We're already late to the house. Let's go, Stern."

The tide of our narrative setting in that direction, it will be well if we, too, look in at the Krane establishment. We shall find ourselves in brilliant company.

Cassian's harshest critics were forced to concede that the house in Park Lane was a focus of whatever passed for smart London these days. Yet those smart Londoners felt oddly ill at ease in Lydia Krane's drawing rooms. Nobody knew whether the man beside him at that moment was attempting to refinance something through Krane's fund; whether his company was currently the subject of an uninvited acquisition offer; or whether he had simply come because others of his set had come, and he had found nothing more compelling that evening.

These uncertainties did not add much to the gaiety of the entertainments, but of their brilliance there could be no possible doubt.

The house had been made over by a celebrated interior architect. There were rooms of deliberate calm and rooms of deliberate theatre, and the rooms of deliberate theatre were, on this evening, very full indeed.

"Where's the Archbishop?" inquired Krane, peering over the upper-floor railing at the throng below. They had entered unseen by way of the private lift.

"I understand," replied Carrick, "that the Archbishop is otherwise engaged this evening."

"Never comes," growled Krane.

Never likely to, was Carrick's thought; but, his position being what it was, he diplomatically replied, "We have been rather unfortunate in that respect."

Carrick—one of the better-connected men in London—worked harder than almost anyone to populate the Krane guest list with the right names (and to protect the comfortable arrangement by which he was recompensed for doing so). This scheme led Krane to believe that his social standing was perpetually ascending, and made Carrick so ashamed of himself that he had, so he confided to an intimate friend, deleted Instagram from his phone entirely.

"Come up and tell me whether the suit works," said Krane. "I'm never sure about these lapels."

Following the financier towards his dressing room, Carrick noticed that Krane's personal assistant—a sharp-faced young woman named Elspeth—had managed to press a folded note into his hand as they passed her in the corridor. Behind Krane's back he read it: *Keep him away from the guests as long as you can.*

"She's already spotted him at it," he thought, and in his sympathy with the difficulties of Lydia Krane's position he forgot, temporarily, the difficulties of his own.

"By the way," said Krane, "did you pull up that piece about the Nexcore business?"

"Yes," said Carrick, producing his phone.

"Read it out," continued Krane, submitting to the attentions of a man with a clothes brush. "While I'm in the middle of this."

Carrick scrolled to the article and read:

"A MYSTERY DONOR IN MICHIGAN

"(_From our Detroit Correspondent_)

"The identity of the individual who deposited funds to the former Nexcore Logistics employees remains unknown. Beyond the name Anton Mercator—which may or may not be the donor's actual name—nothing has been established. The Nexcore facilities were acquired earlier this year by the Dakar Group, which subsequently filed for Chapter 11 restructuring, resulting in the immediate termination of approximately three thousand workers. On the morning after the filing, each former employee received a direct deposit of one hundred dollars and a text message reading 'With the compliments of Anton Mercator.' The Dakar Group's press office did not respond to requests for comment, though sources familiar with the matter indicate that its principal, Maximilian Dakar, has been asked about the payments and declined to speak. A rumour has circulated to the effect that Dakar himself arranged the deposits as a gesture of goodwill, but this has not been confirmed."

"It wouldn't be Dakar," said Krane, emerging with his jacket. "He's not that type. Sounds like a PR stunt from some tech foundation playing at Robin Hood."

Carrick set down his phone and said nothing. There were times when he suspected Krane of reading his expressions, and times when he hoped sincerely that he never would.

They descended in silence to the ballroom.

The evening was in full noise by now, the crowd considerable and the temperature oppressive. Dancing was technically occurring, loyally maintained by a few of Lydia's more enthusiastic friends, but the great majority of the guests had elected simply to form dense clusters and make themselves heard above the music. A DJ whose name Krane had been told twice played from an elevated platform at the far end.

"Who's that tall man with the white hair?" inquired Krane from the sheltered corner to which Carrick had steered him.

"That is Ambassador Leclair," replied his informant. "Former head of the French delegation to the UN. Semi-retired now."

"Good man to have," chuckled Krane. "He's worth knowing, is he, Carrick?"

"Highly respectable," said the latter, dryly.

"We don't seem to pull in the old families. The titles, and so on."

"The older families tend to be rather private," explained Carrick, evasively. "But Lydia is recognised as one of the leading hostesses in London."

Krane swayed his head with a bear-like discontent.

"I don't quite get the social mechanics of this city," he complained. "Don't the titled people move in the same circles as everyone else?"

"Not strictly so," answered Carrick, and signaled for a drink.

This social conundrum proved too much for the financier, and he lapsed into a heavy silence, to be presently broken with the remark:

"All these people I don't know are standing against the walls, Carrick. You see them in the weekend supplements—that one's just been at the right festival, that one's engaged to someone from the papers. Who are they? Start from the left."

Carrick, with genuine good humor, prepared to comply—and then paused, because he found, on looking properly, that he did not recognise them either.

"I rather fancy," he began, "a lot of the people you mean are discoveries of Lydia's—artists, writers, that sort of crowd—"

"No, no," said Krane, with unexpected certainty. "I know all those people—and they all know me. I mean the presentable ones against the wall. I haven't been introduced, Carrick. They've come in since this last track started."

Carrick looked again, and his expression of mild boredom shifted into something less comfortable.

CHAPTER TWO

"THIRTY MEN WHO WERE ALL ALIKE"

The room was so inconveniently crowded that dancing had become a mere farce, kept up by the determined goodwill of Lydia's more enthusiastic friends. The bulk of the company pressed together in intermingling groups, to the accompaniment of ceaseless shuffling and a murmur that all but drowned the DJ's carefully curated set. But lining the wall around was a rank of immaculately turned-out gentlemen who seemed, to Carrick's eye, to be assuming a tighter formation even as he watched them.

In two particulars this rank excited his curiosity.

The individuals comprising it were, as Krane had pointed out, remarkably alike, being all of a type one might loosely describe as ex-military; and they were unobtrusively entering, one behind the other, and taking up their positions around the room with a quiet efficiency that suggested considerable prior rehearsal.

Even as he watched, the last man entered, and the double doors were closed behind him.

"What's this, Carrick?" came a hoarse murmur from Krane. "Where are these people coming from? Does Lydia know they're here?"

"Couldn't say," was the reply. "But it would be a simple matter for a number of impostors to gain access to the house whilst the party was in full swing, provided they came in small groups and looked entirely plausible."

"Impostors!" growled Krane, uneasily. "You think they weren't invited, then?"

"Well, who shut those doors?" muttered Carrick, leaning forward across the low table the better to observe what was unfolding.

"You don't mean—" began Krane, and stopped, as the music cut abruptly mid-track.

For stark astonishment froze the words upon his tongue.

Coincident with the last couple performing their final turn on the dance floor and the hum of conversation rising suddenly to fill the silence, each of the men lining the walls produced a handgun and levelled it at the nearest group of guests.

The conversational hum rose to a momentary roar—and ceased abruptly.

Through the sealed sash windows, the ordinary sounds of Park Lane came clearly: the hiss of tyres on wet tarmac, the distant bass of a night bus. Men who had acquitted themselves well in other emergencies looked down the handgun barrels, glanced back at the women standing near them, and found themselves entirely without inspiration. Nobody moved. Nobody fainted.

"Seriously?" said a woman's voice, somewhere in the crush. "In London?"

"Quick!" whispered Carrick. "We're unobserved—through the conservatory, and—"

"I'm afraid not."

Krane and Carrick turned, together, and found themselves looking directly into the barrel of a compact semi-automatic. A

tall, lean figure in faultless evening dress stood behind them, half in the shadows cast by the curtains. He had jet black hair and wore a close-fitting black silk half-mask across the upper part of his face, cut with a precision that suggested it had been made to order.

The theatrical absurdity of the thing struck Carrick forcibly. Its stark physical reality was equally obvious.

"Perhaps," continued the masked figure, in a low, finely modulated voice, with a faint and elusive accent that Carrick could not immediately place, "you will oblige me, Mr. Krane, by stepping forward where your guests can see you? Sir Richard Carrick—may I trouble you?"

Krane, his heavy features somewhat paler than usual, rose unsteadily. Carrick, after a swift appraisal of the room, rose also, jaw tight; and the three moved forward into full view of the assembled company.

"The gentlemen surrounding you," said the masked figure, lifting his voice by the smallest possible increment, "are all committed to the cause I represent. You might, perhaps, call them extremists."

An audible intake of breath moved through the room.

"They are men for whom the ordinary social contract has long since failed," he continued, "and who are therefore, I am afraid, entirely indifferent to the personal consequences of their actions tonight. I should not recommend testing that indifference. This is not a performance. Any attempt at a mobile phone will be treated as a hostile act."

Outside, a motorcycle accelerated away along Park Lane. Below a window, a taxi's horn sounded once. Around the walls, the silent rank held their positions.

"I shall invite those gentlemen whom I consider most qualified to contribute," resumed the unhurried voice, "to make a donation to the cause I represent. Mr. Krane, as our host, will lead the subscription with the diamond cufflinks—valued, I believe, at approximately fourteen thousand pounds—and the watch. Place them on that table, Mr. Krane."

"I absolutely will not," said Krane, his voice climbing. "This is outrageous. I'll have every one of you—"

"For God's sake," said Carrick, in a low, cutting voice. "Don't be a fool. There are women in this room." He had caught sight of a face in the crowd—pale and frightened—and the thought of these men firing into the press of guests was suddenly intolerable. "It goes against every instinct, but hand it over. There's nothing to be done here—tonight."

"Thank you, Sir Richard," said the masked figure, and waved aside the hand with which Carrick had begun to remove his own signet ring. "I have not called upon you, sir. Mr. Hartmann—your daughters, I feel certain, would wish to see their father's name appear with credit on our list. The necklace, and the bracelet, if you please. I will, of course, furnish you with a formal receipt, sent to your offices in the morning."

And so the extraordinary theatre of it proceeded—until several hundred thousand pounds' worth of jewellery, watches, and

accessories lay arranged on the low table at the foot of a bronze sculpture Lydia had acquired at auction the previous spring.

"The subscription is closed," called the masked figure.
"Doors."

The doors opened at his word, revealing, to those near enough to see, a further rank of evening-dress figures in the corridor beyond.

"The company," he continued, "will proceed in single file to the white drawing room. Mr. Krane—will you lead the way?"

In sullen submission Krane moved, and after him came his guests—or, rather, Lydia's guests—until the whole brilliant company was packed into the smaller room. Someone had, evidently in advance, not only drawn the shutters across the windows giving onto Park Lane but fixed them from the outside, so that when the last straggler had entered and the door pulled shut, they were comprehensively contained.

"Listen, everyone!" came Carrick's voice, steady and carrying. "Stay calm. You three by the door—put your shoulders to it!"

The men nearest the door turned to execute this instruction and found themselves confronted by a printed card pinned to the white panels, which read:

"A full subscription list will be posted across all major news outlets tomorrow morning, and it will doubtless relieve and gratify those who contributed to learn that *the guns were not loaded.*"

There was very little delay after that. Within thirty seconds the door came open. Within two minutes every phone in the room was in use, and the story was already in motion.

Tom Renwick was on his way out of *The Gleaner* offices when his editor rang.

"Renwick! Amazing business at Krane's in Park Lane. Armed robbery. Forty or fifty men. Completely brazen. Go now."

Renwick went.

He turned into Park Lane to find that stretch of the street adjacent to the Krane house already gridlocked with cars, and the pavement choked with people: women still in their event clothes, journalists, police officers, and a considerable number of interested strangers who had watched the social media footage and come directly. It was a scene without precedent at that hour on a residential street in Mayfair.

Working his way towards the steps, he caught an acquaintance coming out—a young man of his own circle who had been at the party and who proved an excellent source.

"Look," the young man said, "I'll be honest, I was a bit late. I came up behind a group going in, four or five of them, all in black tie, and we sort of all went in together. I didn't think much of it. I was watching a footman on the first-floor landing when two of the chaps who'd come in with me just—grabbed him. Threw him face-down on the carpet. I thought it was some sort of stunt, you know, corporate entertainment or something. Then someone put me in a room off the entrance hall and the next

thing I know I've got zip ties on my wrists and a silicone ball in my mouth. Genuinely could not believe it.

"I sat there for what felt like an hour. Could hear absolutely nothing. Then this rush of footsteps coming downstairs, and I could hear them going out in twos and threes—very quiet, very orderly. Then upstairs something went completely mad. The moment I kicked at the door hard enough, Carrick opened it from outside and I was free.

"Krane was in the hallway on his phone. Stern—his man—had been knocked down in the library and was being seen to. The police had turned up by then and were arresting essentially anyone who looked as though they might be ex-forces. And the things from the party—the jewellery and so on—gone completely. Absolutely clean away. It's a preposterous business, isn't it?"

Renwick agreed that it was among the more preposterous businesses he had personally encountered; and, leaving his acquaintance, went to gather further particulars. There were not many to be gathered.

As to the mechanics of entry, very little was mysterious. The guests had presented themselves in small groups throughout the evening and been admitted without incident in a house open to mixed society on a busy night. There was nothing operationally obscure about what had occurred; it was a feat of brazen, coordinated audacity, executed with a professionalism that pointed to a very specific kind of mind at work behind it. Such was Renwick's opinion.

From a guest who had kept her head during the hold-up and observed with considerable composure, he learnt that, excluding the masked spokesman, the men had numbered thirty; were broadly similar in build, being straight-backed and economical in their movements; and, in the single most extraordinary detail of the evening, were facially all alike.

"I know it sounds mad," she said. "But every one of them had the same face. Same hair, same light colouring, same neat fair moustache, same general look. I thought at first I was simply not distinguishing between them properly in the chaos, but I had a good long look at several of them and I'm completely certain. Thirty identical men."

Two further points emerged from a brief exchange with Stern, who received him in the library with a white dressing on the back of his skull and an expression of remarkable composure. Every guest who had been made to contribute this evening had, in the preceding month, received a formal letter requesting a voluntary donation to a named charitable cause. The letters had not been sent by the charities themselves but had arrived by courier, anonymously, on headed paper that referred simply to a named fund.

"They had advance notice," said Stern quietly. "Voluntary first, then compulsory. I think that is the interesting part. And I will tell you something else: every person compelled to contribute tonight has, in the past two years, been publicly connected to a significant workforce reduction, a pension fund restructuring, or an undisclosed offshore position. Every one

without exception. This was not random. The man knows exactly who he is dealing with."

Renwick thanked him, collected the standard police assurance that several significant arrests were anticipated by morning, and took his notes back to *The Gleaner*, where the machines had been kept open for him.

When he finally left the building, it was past three o'clock, and he walked towards the Embankment and the all-night bus that would take him home.

Crossing towards the river, he became aware of a noise he could not immediately categorise—a chaotic human sound, pitched somewhere between celebration and distress—and as he neared the Embankment it resolved itself into voices. Many voices.

The scene that met him was extraordinary.

Directly in his path stood a man he recognised as a regular of the Embankment benches—a gaunt, weathered figure he had seen there on dozens of late-night walks. This man was not sleeping. He was dancing. He was dancing wildly around an upturned cap on the pavement at his feet, and he was throwing banknotes—fifty-pound notes, in their distinctive red and gold—into the air above him, catching some, missing others, laughing with a total absence of self-consciousness at nothing in particular.

Seeing Renwick watching him, he broke into a private song, largely improvised, on the subject of money, snatched up his cap and its contents, and sprinted away towards Waterloo Bridge with the urgency of a man who fully expected to be caught.

Renwick stood and stared.

The night was full of it. Across the length of the Embankment, among the benches and the sleeping bags and the long, dark human geography of London's most visible destitution, something had broken loose. People ran. People shouted. People clutched envelopes and banknotes to their bodies as if they might dissolve. Fights had broken out in several locations over amounts that would not have merited a second glance in the restaurant Renwick had left several hours ago. The handful of officers on patrol moved through it with the dazed expression of people who have attended nothing like this in their professional lives.

A old woman sat at the kerb arranging fifty-pound notes into careful piles with the precision of a person who does not intend to be robbed, while a Community Support Officer attempted, without success, to persuade her that a different location might be safer.

Two men in the remarkable condition that comes from long exposure to bad weather were attempting to flag down an Uber, one of them holding aloft a phone and the other calling out the Savoy's postcode with an air of complete entitlement.

Renwick grabbed the arm of a Salvation Army worker who was moving through the scene with the expression of a man watching his quarterly targets evaporate in real time.

"Don't ask me to explain it," said the man, before Renwick had spoken. "I can tell you what happened, but I cannot tell you why anyone thought it was a good idea. A group of people—twenty, perhaps thirty of them, wearing Salvation Army tabards—came through here over the past two hours distributing sealed

envelopes. Each envelope contained five hundred pounds in cash. Bank-fresh fifties. They were through with it and gone before we had any idea what was happening."

"How much in total?"

"The police are estimating somewhere between three and four hundred thousand pounds. Which is approximately what the guests at a party in Park Lane have reported stolen this evening. I see the connection. What I cannot tell you is whether this is generosity or theatre or both, but I can tell you with absolute certainty that the distribution has created more immediate human suffering along this stretch of the Embankment than anything I have seen in seven years of working here. People have been assaulted for their envelopes. A man has gone into what I believe is a cardiac event from the shock of it. Two women are sitting by the bridge weeping because they have already lost theirs."

He shook his head and moved on.

Renwick stood a moment in the noise and the cold and the scattered notes, and then turned back to *The Gleaner*.

Thus did a singular personality announce his arrival, and fill the British press with adjectives it had not previously needed.

The sensation produced, the following morning, by the Park Lane story was considerable. The sensation produced by the Embankment story ran alongside it in every outlet. The connection between the two was not yet official, but it was universally understood.

On the southbound Northern line, shortly after six that morning, a man in evening clothes—evidently still in last night's—was expounding on the matter to the occupied but politely attentive faces of the other passengers in his carriage.

"What do we make," he was saying, with the confidence of a man who has decided he knows, "of the thirty identical faces? Thirty men who all looked exactly alike?"

"Obviously," said a quiet voice, "it was a disguise. Thirty matching wigs. Thirty matching moustaches. The same prosthetic colouring. Made up to represent the most forgettable possible type of man. If the Metropolitan Police are looking for thirty fair-haired men of similar appearance they are wasting their time entirely."

The man who had spoken was sitting in the seat by the door. He was dark, and had the sort of face that held your attention without quite explaining why—strong without being coarse, watchful without seeming anxious. He had exceptionally dark eyes.

The carriage was listening to him now.

"Made up as the most common, most unremembered variety of English face," he continued, "they could move anywhere in this city tonight without drawing a second glance. The police investigation will find nothing. The future will confirm this."

A man in a corner asked: "Do you think the Park Lane business and the Embankment business are connected?"

"Connected?" The dark man smiled, and rose as the train drew into the station. "You haven't seen this yet."

He handed the man nearest him a phone showing a news notification, said a quiet good morning, and stepped onto the platform.

The notification linked to every major outlet simultaneously. All of them were running the same thing: a press release sent at 4 a.m. to every news organisation in London, from an account that had not existed twenty-four hours before.

WHO IS HE?

"The following press release was received this morning by every major news organisation in the United Kingdom, prepaid for immediate distribution, and is reproduced here in full:

"On behalf of the residents of the Embankment, I record my thanks to the following philanthropists for their generous donations:"

(Here followed a complete list of those guests of the Kranes who had been compelled to contribute the previous evening, headed by the name of Cassian Krane himself; each name accompanied by a precise valuation of the item or items surrendered.)

"They may be certain that not a penny has been deducted for operational costs. Where the realisable value falls

short of the estimated figure, the difference will be met from existing funds. No matter. 'Expend your money in pious uses, either voluntarily or by constraint.'

"(Signed) Anton Mercator"

The phone was passed from hand to hand in the carriage in silence.

"That fellow seemed to know something about it," said someone at last.

None of the others replied. But each looked at the rest—and wondered.

CHAPTER THREE

MIDNIGHT—AND THE MAN

The next two days were busy ones for Renwick, who, from a variety of causes—the chief being his proximity to the small circle which, whether it wished to be or not, now gathered around Cassian Krane—found himself drawn deep into the mystery of Anton Mercator. He had interviewed this man and that, attempting to construct a coherent account of the Park Lane affair, but with limited success. The matter remained an opaque maze, and the Metropolitan Police had nothing that could usefully be called a lead. Every commentator with a podcast or a column had advanced a theory, and now, on the night of the third day after the robbery, Renwick was contributing his own to *The Gleaner*.

The subject of his piece was the identity of Anton Mercator, whom Renwick was arguing to be not an individual at all but an organisation: a decentralised network, so he contended, formed for the deliberate transfer of capital from the few to the many.

The reasoning he had taken up proved more elusive than he had anticipated.

His notes lay scattered across the desk beside him. The news of the latest development—the deliberate burning of the Nexcore facility in Michigan, attributed to persons unknown but widely discussed in connection with the Mercator name—had seemed, at first, to confirm his theory; yet he could make no real progress with it, and the labours of the past two days had left him tired and increasingly dull.

He left the desk and settled into the deep armchair by the gas fire in the corner, pressing his thumb into the bowl of his pipe and relighting it with the automatic gestures of a man whose hands know the job better than his mind does. With his data eventually in better order, he returned to the desk and covered several screens with the rapid, slightly too-fluent prose that comes from exhaustion mistaken for facility. Then the drowsiness he could not altogether suppress crept upon him again; and staring at the words he had just written—*Such organisations have operated in fiction; now, it seems, we have one in fact*—he dropped into a doze, as the clock in the hallway struck one.

When he awoke, his chin on his chest, it was to observe two things in rapid succession: first, that the printed pages of his draft no longer lay on the desk beside the keyboard; and second, on lifting his head, that a stranger sat in the armchair opposite, reading them.

"Who—" began Renwick, coming sharply to his feet.

Whereupon the stranger raised a white, unhurried hand.

"Give me one moment's grace, Mr. Renwick," he said quietly, "and I will at once apologise and explain."

"What do you mean?" said the journalist. "How dare you enter this house in this way, and—" He stopped for want of words, because this composed, immaculately dressed intruder was simply outside the range of things he had prepared a response for.

In person he was slender, though his height was impossible to judge while he remained seated. He was perfectly turned out in evening clothes and wore a long, dark overcoat of the kind that

suggests both money and a considered indifference to what money suggests. A pair of black gloves lay folded on Renwick's writing table, and a walking stick of ebony with a gold collar was propped against the bookcase. A small leather bag sat at his feet.

But the remarkable, the genuinely startling characteristic of the man was his face. Its quality was difficult to describe without sounding excessive. Renwick, who had spent years in the company of people said to be handsome, found himself in the presence of something categorically different: a face of such formal, uncompromising beauty that it seemed less like a natural occurrence than like a solved problem. He thought, absurdly, of illustrations he had seen in art books—Apollo, or one of the idealised young men from Athenian friezes.

And this extraordinary individual, with his absolutely composed features and his large, luminous eyes half closed, sat in Renwick's study at half-past one in the morning and perused an unfinished article in the manner of an old and entirely comfortable friend who had dropped by for a read.

"Right," said Renwick, stepping around the desk as the full effrontery of the situation came home to him. "Out. Now."

"Mr. Renwick," said the other, "if I apologise frankly and fully for my intrusion, will you allow me to give my reasons for it?"

Renwick found himself, once more, without an immediate answer. He was acutely and irritatingly conscious of a dim unease. The visitor's untroubled courtesy under circumstances so

absolutely abnormal had the effect of disarming him, in the way that only a complete absence of defensiveness can. For a moment his right hand closed into a fist; his mind moved uncertainly. The other turned back a page and resumed his reading with a quiet concentration.

That settled the matter, and Renwick laughed.

Whereat the stranger once more raised the cautionary hand.

"We shall wake your wife," he said, with every appearance of genuine solicitude. "Now—as I see you have decided to hear me out—let me begin with a sincere apology for entering your home without invitation."

Renwick, his mind still moving through a sensation of unreality, dropped into the desk chair opposite the visitor and, almost without thinking about it, reached into the cabinet at his elbow for the box of cigarettes he kept there for guests.

"Your methods place you outside the normal range of responses," he said. "I don't know your name and I don't know your business; but I have to tell you honestly that I find your composure—I want to say something stronger than composure—genuinely admirable."

"A compliment is intended, and I thank you," replied the other, in his quiet, carefully modulated voice, with its faint and elusive accent that Renwick could not yet place. "And now—you are wondering, I imagine, how I obtained entry. It is quite simple. Your front door has a traditional Chubb lock. Your wife, some weeks ago, had the misfortune to lose one of her keys. You may remember the occasion. I found that key. Is that sufficient?"

"Entirely sufficient," said Renwick, with a grimness he found it difficult to sustain. "But why go to that trouble? What is it you want?"

"I want to ensure that at least one of the influential news outlets does not persistently misrepresent my actions."

"Then who—" began Renwick, and got no further; for the stranger reached into the breast pocket of his coat and produced a small card—

ANTON MERCATOR

"You will see," continued the man already notorious across two continents, "that your piece there is inaccurate in several important particulars. Your premises are wrong, and your conclusions are consequently wrong as well."

Renwick stared at him in a silence that was not, for once, strategic.

"I have been described across the British and American press as an arsonist, because I ensured that the Nexcore facility would not reopen; as a maniac, because I compensated workers thrown out of employment without notice; as a thief, because I took from wealthy people in Park Lane and gave to destitute people on the Embankment. I say that this characterisation is unjust."

His eyes lit suddenly from within, like dark lanterns. The long, fine hand that held Renwick's pages tightened on them until the paper crumpled. That Anton Mercator was in some sense unhinged struck Renwick as an unavoidable working hypothesis;

that he was forceful, dominant, a force of the kind that bends circumstances to its will, was equally apparent in every line of that remarkable face, in every modulation of that voice, in the quality of attention those eyes carried. The air of the small study seemed charged with something.

Then, in an instant, he was quite composed again. He rose, set aside the heavy coat, and stood—tall, upright, the kind of figure that a room adjusts itself around—with both hands spread slightly open, as if inviting an honest assessment.

"Do I look such a man?" he asked.

Despite the theatrical edge of the moment, Renwick could not deny the genuine quality of the appeal. Studying him: the unlined brow, the wide-set, luminous eyes, the precise and entirely unyielding line of the jaw and mouth—he was compelled to acknowledge that this was not a large-scale opportunist, not a talented criminal in evening dress, but something else, something that did not yet have a category. *Is he mad?* ran through his mind again.

"No," smiled Anton Mercator, settling back into the armchair; "I am entirely sane. As sane as you."

"Have I suggested otherwise?"

"With your eyes and the left corner of your mouth, yes."

Renwick said nothing.

"I shall spare you a detailed defence of everything I have done," continued his visitor. "But you have a list there, no doubt, of the people I compelled to assist the Embankment poor. Name me one whose name has ever before appeared in connection

with genuine charity—I mean the kind that has no relation to a tax position or a press photograph. You are silent. Your article says,—glancing over the pages—"that 'this was a capricious burlesque of true philanthropy.' I reply that it served its precise intended purpose: to announce my presence in London and to demonstrate in concrete terms the nature of that presence. You ask who my associates are. I answer—they are more numerous than you would find comfortable. You wish to know who I am. Seek, rather, to understand *what* I am."

"Why have you chosen me for this—distinction?"

"I overheard some remarks of yours at dinner the other evening, contrasting the restaurant with the Embankment, which suggested to me a mind genuinely exercised by the question. But—to come to the immediate point—do you believe me to be a criminal?"

Renwick smiled, with a slight unease he could not quite suppress.

"You are undecided," the other continued. "It has crossed your mind that the correct course is to call the police. Instead: come with me. I will show you something that will demonstrate how little you currently understand of what I am and what I can do. I will show you that no door in this city is closed to me. Why do you hesitate? You will be home again within two hours. I give you my word."

Possessed of the true journalist's instinct, Renwick found himself pulled hard in the direction of yes; for to the appetite of a man who lives for the story, such an invitation is not

something the professional self will easily decline. After a pause that was genuinely shorter than he intended, he stood up.

"I'll come," he said.

A dark car—silent, long, its windows entirely opaque—stood at the kerb outside the house; and, without a word to the driver, Anton Mercator opened the rear door and followed Renwick in. The car moved off immediately.

"You will have to place yourself completely in my hands," said Renwick's companion. "In a moment I shall ask you to cover your eyes and to give me your word that you are genuinely unable to see. Are you a nervous man?"

"No."

There was a brief silence, during which the car moved through the empty streets at a speed that Renwick estimated as brisk without being reckless.

"If you would oblige me now," came the quiet voice.

Renwick took out his handkerchief and folded it into a firm blindfold.

"Can you see?"

"Nothing at all."

"Take my hand then, and follow quickly. Do not speak. Watch your footing."

Feeling carefully, one hand in his guide's, Renwick stepped out into the cold night air and was assisted—by what seemed to be a third person, possibly the driver—up onto the roof of the car.

"Be still," came Anton Mercator's voice from immediately below him. "Step forward where your feet are guided. Trust me entirely."

Like a man in a dream, Renwick stood on the roof of a car in a London street at two in the morning and waited. From somewhere not far away he could make out the thin sound of traffic on what he judged to be a main road. Immediately around him, silence. They were in some quiet residential side-street well removed from it. A faint sound of movement came, followed by someone dropping lightly onto stone paving.

Then an arm settled around him, and a voice, barely above a breath, directed him to step forward. His foot found what felt like a flat iron railing. His ankle was guided from below.

"On to my shoulders. So."

Still with the supporting arm steadying him, he stepped forward carefully—and found himself standing on the shoulders of the man below.

"Hold absolutely still," said Anton Mercator.

He did; and was lifted—with a lightness that was, given the circumstances, almost offensive—and set down on solid ground. It was the kind of thing he had seen specialist athletes perform, and he felt, briefly and absurdly, a surge of appreciation for the physical quality of the man.

A sharp appetite for the adventure seized him entirely. He thought that there was probably something to be said for a life of this kind. Then he heard the car move off quietly behind him,

and a sudden cold qualm followed: there was no way back now under his own power.

"Take my hand."

He was led to the head of a short flight of stone steps. Carefully he felt his way down in the wake of his guide.

A key turned in a well-maintained lock, and he was guided inside. There was a faint, dry smell about the place—familiar in the way that smells from childhood are familiar, hovering just outside the reach of the name.

"Your shoes," came the soft voice. "Remove them here."

Renwick obeyed; and, holding the guiding hand firmly, traversed what felt like a long stone-paved corridor. Doors were unlocked and locked again behind them. A flight of stairs was negotiated in near-perfect silence, for his companion's feet made no sound at all. Another door.

"Now. Remove the blindfold."

Renwick pulled the handkerchief away and looked about him, sharp with curiosity.

"Good God," he said quietly.

A pagan temple is what the mind reached for first. High above his head a thin wash of moonlight came through a high window and spread itself across the base of an enormous stone pillar. Colossal shapes—gods, clearly gods, or what passed for them in the minds of people dead four thousand years—loomed in the dark on either side. Behind the pillar he could make out a painted procession moving along the far wall, calm, processional,

indifferent to the century. Turning, he saw that Anton Mercator stood at his shoulder.

"Where do you think you are?" asked the low voice.

The answer came like a light switching on.

"The British Museum," said Renwick, barely above a whisper.

"Correct. The treasure-house of your modern Babylon. Wait here until I return; and if you have no appetite for being arrested as a burglar, do not move and do not make a sound."

With that he was gone, dissolved into the deep shadows; and Thomas Renwick, of *The Gleaner*, found himself standing in an Egyptian gallery of the British Museum at approximately a quarter past two in the morning, with no better account of himself available, if discovered, than that he had arrived in the company of Anton Mercator.

He stood very still and thought about this.

He thought of the live blogs and breaking news threads and earnest podcast episodes still being produced, at this very moment, by people who were quite certain they understood what Anton Mercator was and what he was capable of. All of their conclusions would have to be entirely revised, if any of them could be made to believe that the man they were theorising about held private keys to the national collection.

His eyes adjusting, Renwick began to make out more of what surrounded him. A seated figure of the Pharaoh Seti I regarded him with a sculpted contempt that time had only deepened. Beyond, two enormous Assyrian bulls loomed in the semi-dark. He could see now the full length of the great gallery—a carved avenue running

away into the blackness—and as his gaze travelled along it, he detected a shape emerging from the deeper shadows behind the nearer bull.

It was Anton Mercator. In a moment he was at Renwick's side, and Renwick saw that he carried a bag—the same small leather bag that had been at his feet in the study.

"Follow me—quickly. There is no time."

Fully alive now to the reality of his situation, Renwick moved in the wake of this extraordinarily confident man, whose confidence, he was increasingly certain, was grounded in something more than nerve.

"This way."

He followed—upstairs, around a sharp corner, through a door that was unlocked and locked behind them. "In here," came the quick whisper.

A white beam cut the darkness. Renwick saw that his companion was directing a small torch into the interior of a wall-mounted cabinet, which he held open. It contained mummy cases, ranked in the dark. Without quite being able to reconstruct the sequence of decisions that led there, Renwick found himself crouching behind the nearest one. Anton Mercator disappeared.

Darkness, and then—voices.

Distant at first, they grew steadily less so.

On the back panel of the cabinet behind him, a disc of torchlight appeared and began to move. Someone was working through the room with a methodical attention. From the murmur of

voices, there were two of them, no more than a few feet from the glass.

The voices were muffled by the cabinet and the mummy case, but their proximity was exact and unmistakable. Renwick pressed himself against the painted wood with the deliberate stillness of a man who is rationally certain that any protruding edge—a hand, a sleeve, the toe of a sock—is the thing that ends this.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE HEAD OF CAESAR

The voices died away. A door banged somewhere in the distance.

Then Renwick nearly cried out; for a hand closed lightly on his arm.

"Ssh!" came Anton Mercator's voice from the adjacent mummy case; and a soft creak told of the cabinet door swinging open. "This way."

Renwick followed at once, and was guided the full length of the room. A door was unlocked and locked behind them. Downstairs they went, along a narrow corridor lined with glass cases that he could dimly make out on either side, then through another door that brought them to stone steps.

"Your shoes," said his companion quietly, and placed them in his hands.

He pulled them on with fingers that moved more quickly than his thoughts. A faint creak, a draught of cold air; and, guided by a gentle pressure, Renwick found himself outside the Museum, somewhere in the rear of the building, in deep shadow.

"Sss!" came in his ear. "Still."

He held his breath. Unhurried footsteps on the pavement beyond the railings grew, approached, passed, and diminished. When the last echo of them had gone, Anton Mercator raised something to his lips and sent out a long, low, sustained note—minor, faintly eerie, unlike any instrument Renwick could name.

A dark car appeared as if summoned, stopped before them, and was reversed carefully up onto the pavement. The driver got out, mounted to the roof, and dropped a short rope ladder cleanly over the railings.

"Up," Renwick was directed; and, nothing loath, went over.

His companion followed without apparent effort, and almost before Renwick had registered that the worst was behind him, he was seated once more in the smoothly moving car, London flowing past the opaque windows at a speed that felt, after the last hour, almost comically ordinary.

"What does it mean?" he demanded, as soon as his breathing allowed it.

"Be easy," came the reply. "You have my word."

"But what am I committed to?"

"Nothing that will lie very heavily on your conscience. You have seen something, tonight, of what is available to me. With the national collection at my disposal, am I a common thief? If I were, should I not long since have helped myself to the portable items? I tell you again--no door in this city is closed to me; and yet I have never sought to enrich myself from any of them. But why should these things sit idle, when they are such powerful instruments?"

"I don't follow you."

"Tomorrow you will."

"Why the blindfold?"

"Would you have come if you had seen, in advance, where I was taking you? I wish to count you among my friends. You are not

of my people, and I have no natural claim on you. But I want your friendship. May I have it?"

The car passed a streetlamp, and for a moment its light entered the cabin and struck a dull, venomous green spark from the unusual ring Anton Mercator wore on his right hand. The flash of it unsettled Renwick in a way he could not account for; but in the darkness that followed, he turned to look at his companion's face and found those large, luminous eyes already watching him. Something in the man—his nerve, his controlled intensity, the absolute mystery of his purpose—reached in and appealed, with a force that surprised Renwick considerably.

He held out his hand. And withdrew it again.

"Tomorrow—" he began.

"Tomorrow you will have no choice."

"How so? You have placed yourself in my hands tonight. I could publish your description this morning. Report everything you've told me, everything I've seen."

"You will not. You will be my defender in the press. Of what you have seen tonight you will say nothing."

"Why?"

"No matter. It will be so."

A silence settled between them that endured until the car pulled up outside Renwick's house.

With a slightly ironic courtesy, Renwick invited Anton Mercator to come in for a drink after the exertions of the night. With a grace that made Renwick feel the irony had been aimed rather too precisely at himself, the man accepted.

Leaving him in the same armchair that had held him when Renwick first set eyes on him, the journalist went to the dining room and returned with a bottle, a soda siphon, and two glasses. He found his visitor turning the pages of a worn copy of Brugsch's *Egypt Under the Pharaohs* that lived on the lower shelf of the study bookcase. He replaced it carefully as Renwick entered.

"These Egyptologists," he said, with a smile that suggested private amusement at a large joke. "They fascinate me. Dissolve them all in a laboratory flask and the most sensitive analysis would fail to find a single grain of imagination in the residue."

This kindled Renwick's curiosity vividly, but the hour was nearly three and neither man had the energy for it. They drank in a companionable quiet that seemed, to Renwick, almost as strange as everything else about the evening.

When Anton Mercator rose to leave, he paused at the gate and extended his hand, which Renwick took without hesitation.

"Good night—or rather, good morning," he said, with a smile that was, in the grey light, difficult to read entirely. "We shall meet again very soon."

Renwick, too tired to speculate on what that might mean, went back inside, left a note asking not to be disturbed before noon, and went to bed. As he put his head on the pillow the sky through the curtains was already the particular blue-grey of a London dawn that has decided, without enthusiasm, to become a day.

It was just past noon when his wife woke him—gently, and with the expression of someone who has been on the point of doing so for some time.

He sat up.

“What is it?”

“A courier package. They need a signature.”

Still only half conscious, he signed for it at the door, went back to the bedroom, and tore it open. Inside was a single sheet of paper, covered in a small, neat, oddly square handwriting that he did not recognise.

“DEAR MR. RENWICK,

“You were tired last night, so I did not further weary you with a discourse on Egyptology; moreover, I had a matter of some urgency to attend to. But you may recall I suggested the initiated look beyond Brugsch.

“I should be grateful if you could call upon Sir Leopold Halford at his house in Hamilton Place at four-thirty this afternoon. You will find him at home. It is important that you bring a friend with you. In your capacity as a journalist, ask him to show you his celebrated collection. Take the opportunity to request a donation—not less than one hundred thousand pounds—towards the reopening of the closed outpatient wing at Calverton Children’s Hospital. He will decline. At that

point, offer to accept instead the mahogany case which you will find inside his smaller Etruscan urn. When you have secured this, then decide to accept a cheque as well.

"Arrange to be alone in your study at twelve-forty tonight.

"By the way—Brugsch is elementary. There is rather more behind him. Look into the matter.

"S.B."

This singular communication performed what a night's sleep had merely approached: it woke him completely. He ran a bath, dressed, and sat down to a late breakfast with the letter propped against the coffee pot, reading and rereading each line of that small, deliberate script.

The more he considered it the more opaque it became. It was a thread connecting the present morning to the preceding night's events, and as such not entirely welcome in the morning light. Why Anton Mercator required him to examine the Halford collection he could not begin to say; and the instruction to *decide to accept a cheque* seemed to credit him with a persuasive force he was far from sure he possessed. The reopening of the Calverton outpatient wing was unquestionably a worthy cause, and one hundred thousand pounds was a sum Sir Leopold Halford could

perfectly well afford. But he had no particular reason to believe that children's hospitals featured among that gentleman's enthusiasms.

Beyond all this, the presumption of the thing irritated him. Why should he run about London on the instructions of Anton Mercator?

He was still considering this when his phone screen lit up with a news alert.

His heart moved sharply. He cast a quick glance towards the door and then opened the notification.

BRITISH MUSEUM: MAJOR THEFT OVERNIGHT

The Head of Caesar has been removed from its pedestal in the Roman Britain gallery, and the world-famous Hamilton Vase—valued at approximately three million pounds—is also missing. The Museum confirmed the losses in a statement issued this morning. A Metropolitan Police spokesperson said officers are pursuing a significant line of inquiry.

Renwick set the phone face-down on the table.

He sat in his study with his phone and Anton Mercator's letter lying side by side before him, and attempted to think clearly.

That the "significant line of inquiry" would lead anywhere near the real culprit he did not believe for a moment. Anton

Mercator, in Renwick's present estimation, stood at a very considerable remove from conventional police methods. But what was the purpose of this? How could it be reconciled with anything his visitor had said the previous night? And what, precisely, was the meaning of the letter?

He wanted to call Mercator. He had no way to call Mercator.

He wanted to ignore the letter entirely. He was aware, with increasing discomfort, that he would not.

The closing lines had returned to him, persistent as a phrase of music heard and not quite caught: *Brugsch is elementary. There is rather more behind him. Look into the matter.*

An idea arrived—unwelcome, specific, accompanied by a vivid memory.

The bag. Mercator had been carrying it when they fled from the Museum—Renwick had first noticed it at his feet in the study, and then seen it in his hands among the galleries. It had been clearly heavy. When he'd gestured towards it during the drive home, Mercator had shaken his head with a smile and said he would understand in time. And he had set it down on the gravel path outside the gate when they parted.

Renwick walked to the bookcase.

It was a deep one, built into the alcove. With hands that were not quite steady he removed Brugsch's *Egypt Under the Pharaohs*.

His suspicion became a certainty.

Behind the book, wedged between the back row and the wall, regarding him through the gap with an expression of absolute, two-thousand-year-old impassivity, was the marble Head of Caesar.

Renwick put the book back. He lit his pipe at the second attempt and stood at the window for some minutes watching a delivery driver argue with a parking sensor.

He had, he now understood, no meaningful choice in the matter. He rang Ralph Lessing.

Ralph Lessing was a graphic artist and illustrator who had collaborated with *The Gleaner* for years, and whose company Renwick had valued in a range of situations. He was even-tempered, observant, and had the particular quality, rare in a man of visual imagination, of not immediately filling silences with commentary.

"Can you be free at four-thirty?" said Renwick. "I have to call on Sir Leopold Halford in Hamilton Place."

"The collector?"

"Yes. I'll explain on the way."

He explained very little, in the event.

Sir Leopold Halford's collection of Chinese, Greek, and Etruscan ware was among the finest in private hands in Europe, and Renwick, under happier circumstances, would have found it a genuine pleasure to examine. Lessing, who cared about such things in the way that visual people do, was absorbed almost immediately by the Chinese ceramics in the main room—a long, softly lit gallery that seemed to contain no object that was not, in some way, extraordinary.

"This piece would be very difficult to replace, Sir Leopold?" he said, resting his hand on the rim of a magnificent jar of a pale, luminous rose that seemed to generate its own light.

The collector nodded, with the satisfied air of a man contemplating what cannot be taken from him. He was small, sparely built, with the particular compression of frame that comes from decades at a desk: a slight forward lean to the shoulders, as if still in the act of reading a figure. His moustache was neat and carefully maintained, and he was almost entirely bald, the high, unbroken dome of his head catching the gallery's soft light as he moved.

"Two hundred thousand wouldn't touch it," he replied.

Lessing gave a soft whistle and moved on.

"This is extraordinary," he said presently, bending to examine a small vase with figures in relief. "The workmanship is astonishing."

"That piece," replied Sir Leopold, clearing his throat with the satisfaction of a collector who has heard the right thing said, "is almost unique. There is only one other known example—the Hamilton Vase."

"The stolen one?"

"Yes. Both from the same period. Both from the Barberini Palace, originally."

"You've followed the story, presumably. What do you make of it?"

Halford shrugged. "The Hamilton Vase is known to every serious collector in Europe. No one who acquired it could ever show it, let alone sell it." He smiled briefly. "Though I imagine there are those who would want it on those terms."

Renwick set down his cup. He had a thing to do, and the longer he deferred it the less plausible it would become.

"Your collection represents a substantial fortune, Sir Leopold."

"Say four million," said the collector easily.

"A very large sum. Think of what that kind of money would do, put to use."

Having started, Renwick found the business less uncomfortable than he had expected. There was something in Halford's manner—a particular complacency of a man who has equated accumulation with achievement, who has built the story of his own success so carefully that he can no longer see the structure—that made Renwick's ordinarily theoretical convictions feel suddenly very specific. He had been poor as a junior journalist in ways Halford, from his biographies, had never been; and the memory of what a closed hospital ward actually meant to actual people was not, this afternoon, remote.

Lessing glanced at him, slightly surprised, and then began a careful study of the Chinese ware at the far end of the room.

Sir Leopold turned to face Renwick directly, and something in his expression hardened.

"Mr. Renwick. I began with nothing. What I have, I have worked for."

"I don't dispute it."

"Then what is your point?"

"My point is this: had you, in those early years, been seriously ill, the Calverton Hospital would have been there for you. Its outpatient wing has now been closed for want of funding. A hundred thousand pounds would reopen it. Against four million in this room alone, that is not a large number."

Halford's expression shifted into something that might have been suspicion had it not been so immediately combative.

"What have you to do with the Calverton Hospital?"

"Personally, nothing. It has done good work."

"Do you know anything about *this*?"

His manner sharpened further. He took some papers from his jacket pocket, found a plain card among them, and held it out to Renwick without quite releasing it.

The card was headed simply: *Final notice*. It read:

Your donation towards the reopening of the Outpatient Wing at Calverton Children's Hospital has not been received.

Renwick examined it and handed it back, saying nothing.

"I've received three of these," said Halford. "Anonymous. Not from the hospital itself."

"Why not simply comply?" asked Renwick. "Let me announce in *The Gleaner* that you have generously contributed. It would do you no harm."

"What?" said Halford. The word was quiet and dangerous. "Is this the actual purpose of your visit?"

Renwick felt the colour rise in his face. What he was doing was irregular, and he knew it perfectly well. But Halford's tone—the tone of a man for whom any external claim on his resources was inherently offensive—had located in Renwick a stubbornness he had not expected to find there. The hour for scruples had passed. He would see it through to whatever end Mercator had arranged.

"Yes and no," he said. "In fact I've come to ask you for something more specific. The mahogany case that is inside your smaller Etruscan urn."

Halford's face went through several expressions in rapid succession. He looked first at Renwick, then, with a quality of calculation, at Lessing across the room.

"I believe," he said with exaggerated patience, "that you may have had a difficult week."

Renwick said nothing. Lessing, with admirable composure, had already moved towards the pair of large Etruscan urns on their ebony pedestals at the far end of the gallery. He located the smaller one, reached inside with a practised air, and produced a mahogany case of the kind used for silver or small valuables.

"What is *that*?" said Halford sharply. "I know nothing of that."

"Shall I open it?" called Lessing, with a steadiness Renwick found deeply admirable.

"Please," said Renwick.

Lessing opened it.

In a nest of black velvet sat a small piece of pottery—pale, finely figured, unmistakeable to anyone who had spent the last forty-eight hours following the news.

The line in Mercator's letter that had been obscure became, at that moment, transparent: *I had a matter of some urgency to attend to.*

Sir Leopold Halford took one step towards Lessing. Then he stopped. Then he turned to Renwick with an expression that had cleared of everything except a cold, focused attention.

"The Hamilton Vase," he said. "You villain."

"Sir Leopold," said Renwick, with a steadiness that surprised him rather, "I would ask you to moderate your language. If you can offer any account of how a piece stolen last night from the national collection comes to be in your house, I will listen to it with great interest."

Halford looked at Lessing, who stood holding the case with an expression of undisguised bewilderment—genuine bewilderment, which was in the circumstances more useful than a performed version. Then he looked at Renwick.

"There is foul play in this," he said. "I don't know if there are two of you in it, or—"

"Sir Leopold," said Lessing quietly, setting the case down on the table, "you have said quite enough. I don't know how my friend traced the theft to your house, and I don't know how this situation is to be resolved without a great deal of unpleasantness for everyone. But the facts are what they are. There is no defence here. None."

"What do you want?" said Halford. The bluster had left his voice entirely. He was a quick-minded man, and a quick-minded man in this position understands rapidly what his options are.

"Suppose," said Renwick, "you authorise the announcement in *The Gleaner* I mentioned earlier. In return, I undertake to ensure the vase is returned to the Museum through whatever channel is appropriate, and your name is kept entirely out of the matter. Lessing—would you agree to the same?"

"It's an irregular arrangement," said Lessing. "But yes, in this case. For that cause, yes."

"What is my guarantee that you'll keep your word?" asked Halford.

"You have none," said Renwick simply. "Beyond the fact that involving your name in a Museum theft would be considerably more trouble for us than it would be worth."

There was a pause.

"I'll make the transfer directly to the hospital," said Halford, and his tone on the word *transfer* carried a weight of insinuation that was perfectly legible.

Renwick stared at him for a moment, and then felt the colour come back into his face for an entirely different reason. "How dare you," he said. "Do you take us for people who profit from this sort of thing?"

"I honestly don't know what to take you for," replied Halford, with a weariness that was, Renwick thought, almost genuine. "Your methods are not conventional."

CHAPTER FIVE

A MYSTIC HAND

"It amounts," said J. J. Hollister, lord of a considerable portion of Wall Street, "to a panic. No man with serious money is safe. I have limited confidence in Scotland Yard, and I've brought a small security team over from New York."

"A panic," said Baron Marburg, with the measured certainty of a man confirming a diagnosis. "And you believe this Mercator will come for you again?"

"We believe it very much," said Hollister. "He held me up at my Canadian facility for a significant sum. But I've since taken precautions, and if he comes at me again he'd better be extraordinary."

Lydia Krane's dinner party murmured around him with the particular sympathy of people who find a subject both alarming and, at this specific moment, irresistible.

"Of course you've heard, Baron," said the hostess, "that in the outrage here—here, in Park Lane!—he had thirty accomplices."

"Thirty," repeated Baron Marburg, with an economist's precision. "All identical. Extraordinary."

"The remarkable thing," said Sir Richard Carrick, "is that a man with so many associates has not been given away by any one of them."

To the sixteen people gathered around the Krane table this subject was one of very particular and pressing interest, given that it was barely a fortnight since the affair of the ball. The

dining room was long and brilliantly lit, and the atmosphere around it was one that a sensitive observer might have characterised as charged. Let us take a turn about the table.

At the head sat Lydia Krane, flanked by Baron Marburg and Miss Zoe Hollister. Sir Richard Carrick sat opposite Mrs. Maurice Hartmann; beyond her, J. J. Hollister; then Mrs. Wellington Trentham; then Renwick, representing the press; then Salome Hartmann; then Sir Leopold Halford; then Lady Marchwood; then Cassian Krane himself; then Lady Beatrice Ashford; then Lord Marchwood; then Charlotte Hartmann; and finally, completing the oval, Antony Elworth.

Of the sixteen, the majority had, in recent weeks, had strong professional reasons to follow the activities of Anton Mercator with personal rather than merely journalistic attention.

"I understand the man has private access to the British Museum," said Mrs. Hartmann.

"It would surprise precisely nobody," came Cassian Krane's voice from his end of the table, "to learn he's got a private tunnel between wherever he lives and the Bank of England."

Extravagant as this sounded, it would not, in truth, have surprised anyone at that table to learn almost anything about Anton Mercator at this point. The real particulars of his most recent exploit were known to only two people present; but it was general knowledge that, at approximately half-past eleven one morning shortly after the Museum theft, while every news outlet in the country was running the story, a courier van had drawn up

at the main entrance to the institution with a large sealed package consigned to the Trustees.

The courier, when questioned later, described the sender as a very elderly gentleman with unusually long white hair, who had flagged down the van outside a sandwich shop in Holborn and paid cash.

The package contained, carefully and professionally packed, the Hamilton Vase and the Head of Caesar.

It also contained the following note:

"GENTLEMEN—

"I beg to return, by courier, the Head of Caesar and the Hamilton Vase. My reason for borrowing them was that I wished to demonstrate to a wealthy acquaintance that a rare object is a powerful instrument for good, and that to allow great wealth to sit idle while thousands suffer in poverty is a misuse of a stewardship conferred by circumstance.

"I trust you will forgive the anxiety I have unavoidably caused you.

"ANTON MERCATOR"

The note had been made public by mid-afternoon. Every outlet had run it. And alongside it, reproduced from *The Gleaner*,

appeared a paragraph announcing that Sir Leopold Halford had made a magnificent donation of one hundred thousand pounds to the Calverton Children's Hospital. The connection between the two items was invisible to the general public. To two people at the Krane table, however, it was entirely clear; and although Renwick glanced at Halford more than once during the evening, he made careful and consistent work of never meeting the man's eyes.

The activities of Anton Mercator had not left the financial world undisturbed. It was being said, quietly but with conviction, that highly placed figures were connected to him in ways that had not yet been traced. No serious investor felt entirely easy. No one trusted their staff without reservation, their solicitors without a degree of new scrutiny. The sensation was that Mercator's reach was everywhere—that to have capital was to have, already, his attention.

"You've been following this closely, Renwick," said Krane. "What do you know about these advance notices he sends to people he intends to target?"

Renwick cleared his throat with studied casualness. Every face at the table turned to him.

"The authorities have established," he replied, "that everyone Anton Mercator has acted against had received prior notice."

Sir Leopold Halford was watching him with the careful attention of a man reading a text he may need to dispute.

"What do you mean by prior notice?" Halford said.

"They were asked, anonymously, to subscribe to a worthy cause. When they failed to comply voluntarily, they were compelled—rather more directly—to do so."

Cassian Krane began to change colour. He sputtered for a moment before words arrived.

"Is this a free country? If a man isn't out building hospitals for the indigent, does he have to be held at gunpoint—"

He caught his wife's expression across the table.

"Well," he concluded, with a deflation that was, in its way, magnificent. "Isn't it something."

Baron Marburg said, with great deliberateness, that he would not feel safe until he had returned to Dusseldorf.

"I am told," said Antony Elworth, from his end of the table, "that the authorities are anticipating a new development."

That released something. Half a dozen voices spoke at once, and beneath each of them the same question ran: *Have you received a card?*

It became apparent that this was a thing each guest had been carrying privately, reluctant to raise, and now rather relieved to surface. What emerged was striking.

Every one of the major financial figures present had received, within the past week, a short communication stating that one million pounds was urgently required for the establishment of a national rough-sleeping emergency fund, to be administered under the patronage of the Lord Mayor and the Marquess of Ashford. The note had arrived by courier in each

case. Each bore a small printed seal in the form of an ancient six-pointed star.

"How many of us," said Cassian Krane, his voice cutting through the others, "have had one of these?"

A brief accounting revealed that five people at the table had received the notice. Mrs. Hartmann added that her husband had received one at his office.

"With Hartmann, six," said Krane.

"It seems to me," said Antony Elworth, in his quiet, considered way, "that one should establish without delay how many of these notices have been distributed in total."

"Why?" asked Krane.

"Because, from everything we know of Anton Mercator's methods, he intends to raise this sum, or a significant portion of it, from precisely our circle. One is naturally interested in learning the scale of one's own probable liability."

Baron Marburg inquired, with the bluntness of a man who prefers things stated plainly, whether he was expected to contribute to a British rough-sleeping fund.

"You have British interests, Baron," said Renwick, pleasantly.

"And you, Mr. Hollister?" asked Lady Marchwood.

Replied his daughter, with a smile that was very like her father's in its directness:

"He has Canadian interests, Lady Marchwood. I imagine that counts."

The impending development—for all present felt these notices to be a preliminary to one—was treated with the slightly forced lightness of people who are genuinely unsettled but find it important not to appear so. The subject might well have given way to something less loaded, when a murmur of conversation arose at the lower end of the table.

"Exactly the same," came Salome Hartmann's voice, "as the one Father received."

She was seen to be passing something to her neighbour—Renwick. He examined it with a journalist's eye and passed it to Mrs. Trentham. Thus, from hand to hand, it made its way around the table until it arrived at Cassian Krane.

"That's one of them." He tossed it down on the cloth.

It was a small, square card of heavy stock, bearing the following text:

*£1,000,000 is required, urgently, for the National
Rough-Sleeping Emergency Fund, established under the
patronage of the Lord Mayor and the Marquess of
Ashford. A public subscription has been opened through
The Gleaner.*

At the foot was a seal: an archaic six-pointed star, precisely rendered, the kind of symbol that appears in the margins of manuscripts older than most of the institutions represented at the table.

"Whose is this?" continued Krane, and turned the card over.

He read what was printed on the reverse. Something moved across his face—a sequence of changes too rapid to follow—and settled into a flat, patchy pallor.

The reverse read:

To Baron Marburg, Sir Leopold Halford, Messrs. Cassian Krane, John Jacob Hollister, and Antony Elworth.

Second Notice.

He gripped the arms of his chair.

"Where," said Krane, and stopped to wet his lips, "did this come from?"

A silence had descended on the table.

"Sir Leopold passed it to me," said Salome Hartmann, and there was a note in her voice that had not been there a moment before.

Krane stared at Halford. Halford turned and looked at Salome Hartmann with the focused attention of a man correcting an error of fact.

"You are mistaken," he said. "I have not touched that card."

Salome Hartmann's dark eyes went wide.

"But Sir Leopold—I took it from your hand."

Halford's composure remained intact but something behind it shifted.

"I can only say," offered Renwick, who sat on the other side of the girl, and whose tone was measured enough to suggest he was

choosing every word, "that I observed Miss Hartmann examining the card and asked to see it. I then passed it to Mrs. Trentham. I should add"—with a slight smile—"that the notice does not originate from *The Gleaner*, and is not in any respect official."

"I received it from Mrs. Trentham," said Hollister, his voice not quite its usual self.

"But Miss Hartmann is simply mistaken in thinking she received it from me," said Halford, with the precision of someone delivering a verdict. "I did not handle it. Nor, I believe, did Lady Marchwood?"

Lady Marchwood shook her head with a firmness that suggested she wished to make this absolutely clear.

"No. I saw Mr. Krane take it from Lady Beatrice."

"I must say"—Lord Marchwood leaned forward and addressed his wife along the table with the earnest air of a man contributing a fact—"I had it from Miss Charlotte Hartmann, on my left."

Krane's eyes moved from face to face around the table. On every one of them, bewilderment.

Lydia Krane coughed.

The question that her husband did not complete hung in the air above the table with complete clarity:

Where in the world had the second notice come from?

In the silence that followed, each guest pursued the answer according to their own temperament. The seating arrangement has been described. The guests were positioned around a large oval table, and their adjacencies were plain. No servant had been on that side of the room during the relevant period. The card had

not been there a quarter of an hour before. No one had brought it in.

"The mystery," said Sir Leopold Halford, with the careful economy of a man who has decided to appear calm, "seems to begin with Miss Hartmann's impression that I gave her the card. I did not. Given that Miss Hartmann is herself among Mercator's targets, we cannot reasonably suspect her. Nor, I hope, am I under suspicion. The question is whether any member of staff was present on this side of the table when the card was first noticed."

A brief inquiry established that no one had been.

"Salome, dear," said Mrs. Hartmann, with the controlled quietness of a woman choosing not to show how thoroughly this has unnerved her, "did you pick the card up from the table, or actually receive it from someone's hand?"

The table waited.

"From someone's hand," said Salome Hartmann.

CHAPTER SIX

THE SHADOW OF ANTON MERCATOR

The mystery of personality is one which eludes research along the most rigorous lines. It is a species of magnetism as yet unclassified. Personality is not confined to the individual: it clings to his picture, to his handwriting, to the objects he has touched; it has the persistence of a perfume that has soaked into stone.

From the slip of cardboard lying upon the Krane table emanated something—unseen, but felt by everyone in the room. The name *Anton Mercator* seemed to glow in the air above it, as those other words had once glowed upon a Babylonian wall.

There were those present who took the view that *who steals my purse steals trash* was the silliest sentiment ever committed to verse. It was at the purses of precisely these people that the next blow would be struck—at the most vital and tender part of their beings.

"That card," said Cassian Krane, running his tongue across his lips, "cannot have dropped from the ceiling."

He looked upward as he said it, though; and it was apparent that he had begun to credit Anton Mercator with capacities that put ordinary physical constraints in some doubt.

"It would appear," said Antony Elworth, "that a phantom hand materialised at the table."

The incident was eerie under any circumstances; in its association with Anton Mercator it was something more. Krane

ordered that the outer door was not to be opened under any circumstances until the house had been thoroughly searched. He led the search party himself, moving from room to room with the focused energy of a man doing something he can actually control, while Lydia Krane remained with the guests.

The search found nothing. Krane returned and was met in the corridor by Baron Marburg, who had separated from the others and now stood by the library door with the expression of a man who has just had an unpleasant thought confirmed.

"Krane," said the Baron, quietly and carefully, "my name on that card—it was underlined in red."

Krane's response was immediate, and barely above a whisper.

"The stones."

Indeed, this new detail was significant. Baron Marburg had brought with him, for Krane's private examination, a pouch of rough-cut diamonds. Both men had professional interests in the South African and Botswanan markets; and in both men's recent histories there were chapters, not widely known, concerning provenance certificates that did not entirely withstand scrutiny, and an undisclosed consignment that had moved through channels both of them would prefer were not traced.

The two men stood looking at each other in the corridor, and both of them glanced, once, into the shadows at the far end of it.

"He would have to be extraordinary," said Krane, "to know about those stones. But it does look as though—"

"Where can I put them," said Marburg, "where a man who can apparently open any door in London cannot reach them?"

"Marburg," said Krane, with a shakiness that was unlike him, "you'd be safer at your hotel than here tonight. He's done this house once already."

What animated Krane principally, it must be said, was anxiety that *his* name and *his* address should not be connected with another outrage. He knew Marburg to have valuable stones on his person, and his instinct ran in two directions simultaneously: first, to protect them from Mercator; second, and rather more urgently, to ensure that if Marburg was going to be robbed he was robbed somewhere else.

"I did not order my car until midnight," said Marburg.

"I can have mine ready in—"

"I won't wait. Get me a cab."

This aligned perfectly with Krane's private wishes, and he lost no time. Stern appeared in the corridor at that moment, emerging from the library with his phone in hand.

"Stern," said Krane, "will you have someone call a cab for the Baron? And—you haven't heard anything unusual while you've been in the library, have you?"

"Nothing," said Stern, and withdrew.

The two men returned to the drawing room. Sir Leopold Halford was standing near the fireplace, deep in conversation with Salome Hartmann. Krane caught the end of it.

"You positively saw the hand?"

"Positively," the girl said. "It just slipped the card into mine—at exactly the moment Mr. Renwick leaned over and asked me whether my bracelet had ever been recovered. The one Mercator took here, at the party."

Renwick was within earshot.

"I saw you take the card, Miss Hartmann," he said. "Though I couldn't see from whose hand you received it. Sir Leopold was seated on your left, and there was no one else in the immediate vicinity at that moment."

Sir Leopold Halford looked at Renwick very steadily. Renwick looked back. There was a great deal between the two men that pressed towards open statement and could not achieve it.

"Come now," said Krane, his coarse voice cutting across the tension. "What's the use of arguing about it?"

But the atmosphere in the drawing room had not recovered its earlier equilibrium. Lydia Krane, accomplished hostess that she was, found herself working harder than usual to maintain the surface of the evening. The guests whose names had appeared on the second notice were contributing little to the effort.

Lady Beatrice Ashford and Sir Richard Carrick had found themselves a corner beneath a drooping palm, beside the small bronze statuette of Pandora that stood on its pedestal near the window—the same pedestal, Carrick noted, from which Mercator had directed operations on the night of the party.

"It was through that door," said Carrick, nodding towards the far end of the room, "that the masked man came."

"Yes," said Lady Beatrice. "I was standing just by the double doors. I remember seeing you look up."

A brief silence settled between them, and then Lady Beatrice said, with the directness that Carrick had noticed was characteristic of her:

"Do you know, I find it almost impossible to feel any sympathy for the people who lost things that night. They are entirely the sort of people who have never voluntarily given anything to anyone. Krane's circle, taken as a whole, is wonderfully, comprehensively mean about money. Which makes it rather amusing that everyone continues to come here. Don't you think?"

Carrick, when he came to consider it, did not find it amusing in the slightest. Cassian Krane was a force whose reach had extended through the social structure with the efficiency of a root system; and Carrick was entangled in it to a degree that made extraction, short of a complete and costly withdrawal, very difficult to imagine. Lord and Lady Marchwood attended the house regularly. The Marquess of Ashford did not visit in person, but he permitted his daughter to appear here under the chaperon of Mrs. Wellington Trentham—and Carrick understood the financial arithmetic that explained this arrangement. He had understood it for some time.

What a remarkable power money possesses over those who affect to be indifferent to it.

Carrick found himself studying the expressions that crossed Lady Beatrice's face as she glanced about the room—a slight,

thoughtful frown moving behind her eyes as she considered something. He was aware that he had been watching her with more attention than was strictly required of him.

Baron Marburg came to make his farewells. He was a man thoroughly unsettled, and doing a creditable job of not showing it. When he finally left, Krane walked him to the entrance hall.

"Take care of yourself, Marburg," he said, with a weight of genuine concern. "First thing in the morning, put the pouch in the bank vault. Don't leave it at the hotel."

The Baron assured him he intended to do exactly that.

Outside in Park Lane a car was waiting, its engine idling. Stern held the door. Baron Marburg registered the service with neither acknowledgment nor eye contact, in the manner of a man who has long since stopped distinguishing between a door held open by a person and one held open by a mechanism. Stern seemed neither to expect nor require any acknowledgment. He closed the door, turned, and went back up the steps.

"Good night, Marburg," called Krane from the top step. "And remember what I said about the one with the inclusion in the table."

The car moved off.

The departure of Baron Marburg had the effect of making the remaining guests reconsider their own intentions. A cloud had settled on the evening that no amount of good wine or Lydia Krane's considerable social skill was able to entirely dispel. Within the next quarter of an hour, departures multiplied: first Lord and Lady Marchwood with the Hollisters, father and daughter;

then Mrs. Hartmann and her daughters; then Mrs. Wellington Trentham and Lady Beatrice, with Sir Richard Carrick moving to offer his services as escort with a decisiveness that surprised even him.

"Just a moment, Carrick," called Krane from the foot of the staircase.

Carrick paused in the hallway.

"I don't suppose you have any idea how the card trick was worked? And should I ring the police about it?"

"No idea whatsoever," replied Carrick. "As for the police—yes, ring them. Ring them immediately. Good night."

He went, fully aware that Krane was casting about for a pretext to keep him. Whatever the pretext was, it was not worth the drive to Mayfair that he would otherwise miss. Lady Beatrice Ashford's company was, on its own terms, worth a certain amount of social inconvenience.

"I agree with Carrick," said Renwick's voice.

Krane turned. A member of the household staff was helping Renwick on with his coat in the doorway. Antony Elworth, already dressed for the cold, was standing beside him.

"Who has the Anton Mercator case at the Met?" asked Krane.

"Detective Chief Inspector Bingham," said Renwick.

"Right," said Krane. "I'll call him."

Renwick and Elworth departed.

Sir Leopold Halford had not yet left. He was waiting at the top of the stairs.

"Come into the library," said Krane. "Stern's finished in there. We won't be disturbed."

The library was long and handsomely appointed, its shelves carrying an expanse of well-bound, largely unread volumes. Halford stood before the fireplace looking down at Krane, who had arranged himself with his customary inelegance in the deep armchair and was working at the stub of a cigar.

"I don't trust Renwick," said Halford, without preamble.

"Oh, come off it," said Krane. "A journalist who makes his living by staying in with the right people isn't going to ally himself with a man who robs them."

"I'm not certain of that," said Halford. "My own position in this is a particular one, and I won't go into details. I'll say only that I don't trust him—and I won't go a step further than that. I don't expect you to repeat my opinion."

"I won't," said Krane. "It's too absurd. What would he stand to gain? He isn't in our world."

"I'll say nothing more," said Halford. "But watch him."

"I'll do that," Krane agreed. "I hope Marburg gets back to his hotel without incident. Those stones of his are first-rate and I'd hate to see them go the way of the Park Lane jewellery. Did you notice that red underlining? Looked to me as though he was singled out."

"That was my reading of it, yes." Halford paused. "By the way—what happened to the card? Where is it?"

"No idea," said Krane. "I must have put it down somewhere. Press that bell, will you? I want a drink."

Halford reached for the bell.

Krane, fishing in the inner pocket of his jacket for a fresh cigar, paused.

"Hallo."

Halford turned.

Krane was holding a card.

"Is that it?"

"Yes," said Krane, and turned it over.

His face changed colour in a way that no careful observer would have cared to describe as merely pale.

"What is it?" said Halford.

Krane held it out. His hand was not entirely steady.

Halford took the card and read what was on the reverse.

The text was identical to that of the card that had circulated the dinner table; but the reverse bore only a single name.

It was that of Cassian Krane, and it was heavily underlined in red.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE RING

As the car carrying Baron Marburg moved off along Park Lane, the Baron allowed himself a careful exhalation. This incomprehensible Anton Mercator, who had descended upon London like a hot wind from somewhere outside the normal range of threats, was a profoundly unsettling presence. The house in Park Lane, already the scene of one extraordinary evening, had done nothing to steady Marburg's nerves. A man carrying several hundred thousand pounds' worth of rough-cut stones upon his person may be excused a degree of alertness.

He was glad to be away from the house, and, as the car turned past the corner of the Park, glad to be away from Park Lane itself. He sat back and watched London flow past the window.

It was then that he noticed the route.

He was not intimately acquainted with London's streets, but the general orientation of the city was not lost on him; and it seemed to him now that the driver had taken a turning that led away from his hotel rather than towards it. He leaned forward and pressed the button for the driver's intercom.

"I am going to the Hotel Astoria," he said. "Is this the correct way?"

The driver gave no response. He did not turn his head. He drove straight ahead with the steady attention of a man following a route he knows well.

Baron Marburg pressed the button again.

Something struck him in the face.

Not a blow—nothing so definite. A cloud of something, drifting from the ventilation, sweetly chemical, reaching back to him where he sat. He raised his hand towards the window and found the glass immovable in its frame. The lights of the street—the sound of the traffic—were growing distant in a way that had nothing to do with the car's motion, receding to some farther place, quieter and quieter. He reached for the door handle. His fingers found it. And then his fingers ceased to matter.

He slipped.

His next impression was of a room entirely unlike any he had been in before.

The floor was composed of blocks of red granite, dry and cool underfoot. The walls were smoothly plastered. An unglazed window made a black rectangle in one wall, through which came the faintest distant sounds of traffic; near, and yet unreachably remote. Upon a large, ancient table covered with books and papers stood a lamp that arrested the eye immediately: apparently silver, formed in the shape of a clutching hand, which held a globe of warm light, above which a coloured shade cast soft geometric shadows across the stone. The table itself was black with great age, and the chair drawn up to it was equally antique—heavily carved, substantial, the kind of object that has not been made for two centuries. Before the chair, on a coarse fibre mat, a yellow cigarette smouldered in a tray. And across the room, draped before a recess at one end, hung a curtain of Damascene

silk: dark crimson, patterned with an intricacy that rewarded study, shifting slightly as though something breathed behind it.

The Baron was in a deep, cushioned chair. He had no memory of sitting down in it.

Across the table, watching him with an absolute, unhurried attention, sat Anton Mercator.

He was wearing a long, dark robe that gave him the look of a scholar from some other century. His large, luminous eyes were set, without any sign of impatience, upon Marburg's face.

"I am dreaming," said Marburg.

He stood, unsteadily, one hand going to the side of his head.

There was a perfume in the room—faint, complex, the smoke of those yellow cigarettes—and as he breathed it in, his thinking clarified, incrementally, as though a lens were being adjusted. Memory returned. He was not dreaming. He thrust his hand to his inside breast pocket.

"Please do not concern yourself, Baron," said the man at the table. His voice was low and precise. "The packet of diamonds is here."

He held up the pouch as he spoke.

Marburg stepped forward, fists closing.

"You have robbed me. By God, you will regret this. Who are you?"

"Sit down, Baron. I am Anton Mercator."

Marburg stopped in the centre of the room and stared at the man who sat there with the composed ease of someone entirely at

home, in a room that looked as though it had been furnished by a very learned person in a previous millennium. Then he turned and went to the door. It was locked. He faced back.

Anton Mercator smoked.

"Sit down, Baron," he said again.

Marburg looked about him for anything that might serve as a weapon. Nothing offered that was useful. The carved chair was enormously heavy. With his jaw set and his hands open, he moved towards the table again.

Anton Mercator rose. He did not raise his voice. He kept his eyes on Marburg's face with the same steady, penetrating attention as before, and there was in those eyes something that Marburg had not encountered in forty years of confrontational negotiation: the look of a man who is not, at this moment or any other, afraid.

"For the last time. Sit down."

The words arrived with a quiet authority that seemed less like a command than a statement of what was going to happen. Marburg stopped. He was a man who assessed odds automatically, without conscious effort; and the odds here, wherever *here* was, were not assessable in his favour. Mercator had associates in numbers that had not been established. Whatever this cell was, it was not somewhere Marburg had been brought by one person. To attempt personal violence now would be the precise kind of error that had never been his habit.

He sat down.

"Good," said Anton Mercator, resuming his own seat. "Now. Let us discuss the matter of the million pounds."

"I will not—"

Mercator raised one hand.

"You will not contribute to a fund for people sleeping in doorways, when you draw rather more than twenty thousand pounds per annum from your position as undisclosed principal in a Hatton Garden firm with interests in the very markets your official portfolio claims no exposure to? That does seem inconsistent."

Marburg stared.

"I have no connection with any firm in Hatton Garden."

"No? Then you will have no objection to my forwarding to the Kimberley Process secretariat the documents which I have here"—Mercator laid a hand upon a folder on the table—"and which include the provenance certificates for this specific consignment, together with correspondence between your agent in Gaborone and the firm in question, and a letter from the firm's director addressed to you personally. These documents establish, with precision, the manner in which this parcel reached London and why its certification does not survive examination. The Kimberley Process compliance office is not difficult to reach. Shall I do so in the morning?"

Baron Marburg's large features underwent a rapid alteration. He leaned forward, both hands on his knees, the posture of a man who has abruptly changed the nature of the conversation he is in.

"Why do you single me out?" he said, with a quietness that cost him something. "Elworth—"

"Mr. Antony Elworth has already responded to my first notice. He forwarded a cheque for five hundred thousand pounds to *The Gleaner* three days ago. He acts on his own judgment in these matters and I consider him a man of principle. Should you care to see his letter?"

"Five-hundred—"

"Indeed. He proposed, moreover, that the fund be seeded by the larger subscribers precisely so as to encourage participation from smaller ones. His name does not require me to obtain it."

Marburg sat very still for a moment.

"This will destroy me professionally."

"Will it? Consider the alternatives, Baron. Which of the two consequences strikes you as the more professionally destructive?"

Marburg looked at the man across the table: the long robe, the dark hair, the hands resting with complete stillness on either side of the folder. And then his gaze moved, as it had once or twice already, to the ring.

It was on the right hand—a single ring, the stone occupying the bezel with the settled authority of something that has been in the same position for a great deal longer than the hand wearing it. The stone was green, or appeared green in this light; but within it, when the lamp caught it at a certain angle, something moved—a device, or a refraction, or simply the particular depth of very old cut stone—that resembled lines of fire seen through water. It was unmistakably, incalculably old. The kind of object that makes the word *antique* sound inadequate.

Marburg found, to his annoyance, that he could not look away from it easily.

"What is that ring?" he said.

"It is very old," said Anton Mercator.

"Where does it come from?"

"From a time and a place where what you do with what you are given was not considered a private matter," Mercator replied.

"Every man who has accumulated more than he can use in a lifetime, in every age and every culture, has understood this. He has known it whether he admitted it or not. You know it, Baron."

Marburg pulled his eyes from the ring with an effort.

"Who are you?" he said. "What are you?"

Anton Mercator stretched his right hand out flat across the table, palm down, beneath the lamp. The stone in the ring glowed with that same deep, internal light—iridescent, serpentine, very still.

"I am someone who knows everything about you that you have spent considerable energy and considerable money ensuring that no one should know. That is, for present purposes, sufficient."

Marburg sat in silence. The room pressed around him. The faint, distant traffic sounds continued, indifferent. He had spent his professional life in the conviction that every situation had a move available to the man who was willing to look for it. He looked for it now. He could not find it.

"You mean to ruin me," he said finally.

"I mean to hold you to the same standard to which every person in this city is nominally held, but from which your

resources have thus far insulated you. That is rather different from ruin."

"And the diamonds? You intend to keep them?"

"I intend to consider the matter of the diamonds. Their provenance is a problem that will remain a problem whether they are in your pocket or mine."

"And if I give you this cheque—"

"Immediately the funds are confirmed I will return the folder of documents. You have my word."

"The word of a man who drugs people in cabs," said Marburg. The words had more defeat in them than anger.

"And before you came to London," replied Mercator, without particular heat, "the conduct of men who falsify provenance documents for stones extracted from conflict regions. We have both, Baron, operated in terrain we would rather not have examined too closely. I am nonetheless prepared to give you my word."

A silence.

"Before you decline definitively," said Mercator, "I would ask you to draw aside that curtain and examine what is behind it."

He indicated the Damascene curtain at the end of the room.

Marburg looked at it. He looked at Mercator. Something in his expression—something that was not quite fear, but was contiguous with it—prevented him from rising.

"I decline," he said, "to look behind that curtain."

"By which," said Mercator quietly, "I understand that you have decided what answer to give me."

Baron Marburg took his cheque book from his pocket. His hand was not steady, but it was steady enough.

He wrote a cheque for five hundred thousand pounds, payable to the editor of *The Gleaner*, and pushed it across the table without speaking.

As he straightened, something reached his nostrils again—that sweetness, heavier now, definitively chemical under the cigarette smoke. He had not been clever about it the first time, and he was not clever about it now. The room began to recede in the same direction it had receded before, the carved table and the lamp and the man with the luminous eyes growing smaller, as though seen through the wrong end of a telescope, until they were a point of light, and then nothing.

The voice of Anton Mercator reached him from a very great distance:

"In future, Baron, I hope you will find better uses for your opportunities."

"Wake up, sir. Can you hear me? Do you know where you are?"

Marburg struggled towards consciousness. There was cold stone beneath him. A voice above him, patient, mildly concerned.

"Hold on, sir. I'll get you a cab. What address?"

He opened his eyes. A police officer was crouching beside him with the professional calm of someone who has found people in worse states than this on worse streets. Marburg looked about him, dazed. He was seated on the stone steps of the Burlington

Arcade, which was closed, and dark, and gated, and utterly indifferent to his presence.

"Hotel-Astoria," he said; and his head dropped forward again as he was helped, by degrees, into the waiting cab.

CHAPTER EIGHT
IN THE DRESSING ROOM

The house was very quiet.

Cassian Krane stood quite motionless in his dressing room, listening for a sound he expected to hear but also feared to hear. The household in Park Lane was asleep. Park Lane is never entirely silent at any hour of the night, and now, as Krane all but held his breath, the usual murmur of the street reached him from below: a late bus, a distant siren, the low continuous breath of the city. None of these was what he was listening for.

He had been in the room for more than half an hour; had sent his valet away long since; and had sat in his armchair, arrayed in the expensive but somehow undignified lounge suit he had changed into after the dinner, to smoke a cigarette and attempt a rational review of the situation.

Anton Mercator, having demonstrated his reach in several other directions, had evidently turned his attention back to Park Lane. Krane mentally compared himself and his circle to those figures in Roman spectacle who were sent unarmed into the arena to face men with weapons: no precautions availed, no defence was possible, and the police had yet to make a single meaningful arrest. So here he sat, in his own house, with a strip of card in his jacket pocket bearing his name in red, anticipating an outrage he could feel coming and could do nothing whatever to prevent.

Again there came that vague disturbance—and it seemed to come not from the street or the floor above, but from somewhere very close at hand. From—

Krane turned his head, slowly, with the particular caution of a man who is not certain he wants to see what he is about to see.

The cigarette dropped from his fingers and lay burning on the carpet.

He was staring at the doors of the large wardrobe that occupied the wall between the two windows. He was quite certain those doors had been closed. They were not closed now. He had a precise and recent memory of them being closed, and they were open. Not by much—a finger's width, no more—but the gap was there, and it had not been there before.

Paralysed, he sat and watched and grew cold.

The doors were opening. Slowly, and without sound, they were opening.

He made no move towards defence. He was, quite simply, unable to.

A gleam appeared in the dark gap—something metallic, something cylindrical, unmistakable in its implication. Between two fingers, a card was extended into view. Upon it, in red capital letters:

DO NOT MOVE

The warning was, at once, unnecessary and entirely disregarded. Krane shook the chair with his trembling.

A second, smaller card was tossed across the room and landed on the table before him. The hand he extended towards it was shaking badly. The watch on his wrist caught the lamp and glittered. Through the pounding in his temples, he read:

"Your cheque book is in the inside pocket of your jacket, which hangs beside me. I will throw it across to you. You will make out a cheque for one hundred thousand pounds, payable to the editor of *The Gleaner*, and write a brief note to accompany it explaining that this is your personal contribution to the National Rough-Sleeping Emergency Fund. You will keep your eyes forward throughout."

From behind the wardrobe door—which had stopped moving and now disclosed only the gleam of the barrel and the dark beyond it—came a second object, thrown with considerable accuracy. It landed before him on the table.

His cheque book.

Mechanically, Krane opened it. Inside the cover, a further card:

"A pen lies on the table. Write the cheque and the note now, without hesitation. When you have done so, throw them behind you towards the wardrobe, and do not look

around. Should you attempt to look around, you will be warned once. Should you attempt it a second time, the outcome will be different."

Perfect silence had settled over the room. Even the traffic below had thinned to almost nothing. From behind the wardrobe doors, no sound at all.

Krane took the pen. His mind was functioning, after a fashion, but the part of it that dealt with schemes and exits and reversals had gone very quiet. There was only the barrel. He made out the cheque. His fingers controlled themselves sufficiently for that.

Then the note. He wrote it with the methodical care of a man performing a task in a dream, with the difference that he knew it was not a dream:

"To the Editor of *The Gleaner*,

"Sir,—I enclose my cheque for one hundred thousand pounds"—at these words Krane's hand paused, and the thought *I could simply refuse* crossed his mind with the speed and brevity of a thought that knows it has no future—"for the National Rough-Sleeping Emergency Fund. I hope that others in a position to do so will contribute in a similar spirit. Yours truly, Cassian Krane."

He folded cheque and note together. He stretched his arm behind him, without turning, and released them in the direction of the wardrobe.

Then he sat very still and waited.

Several minutes passed. Several vehicles went along the Lane. He listened to them with the absolute, involuntary attention of a man who has no alternative. From behind him, the wardrobe offered nothing: no creak of a door, no sound of movement, no breath.

The thought came to him that perhaps, even now, he might be shot. That there was some additional demand he had not satisfied. That his note had been poorly phrased. He sat and experienced the anticipation of violent death, at length, and found it a thoroughly comprehensive experience.

The traffic quieted. The house was still. Nothing moved.

Only his mind moved—working, despite everything, towards a scheme. One hundred thousand pounds. Monstrous. But if he presented himself at *The Gleaner* offices the moment they opened, before the morning post had been sorted, and explained to the editor that this had been written under duress—that a late night and a great deal of pressure had led to a misunderstanding about the number of noughts—what then? Surely the editor was a reasonable man. A thousand pounds was, in its way, generous. The editor would understand.

He was growing stiff.

The hall clock struck the hour.

Two o'clock. He had been sitting here for an hour.

His eyes found the card on the table before him. *Should you attempt it a second time, the outcome will be different.*

The scheme about *The Gleaner* editor dissolved and reformed. If he went in person to the office before the post was opened, and if the cheque had already arrived... if it had already been processed... if Renwick had already been told...

He was growing stiffer.

An act of sudden resolve seized him. Anything, he decided, was preferable to this.

He began to turn his head.

It was a trap—he saw that at once. A device to hold him here in his chair, docile, while his cheque was delivered and the whole thing made irreversible. A ruse, nothing more. He had been sitting here for an hour surrendered to a ruse.

He turned further. The corner of the wardrobe came into his field of vision. A little further. The gap between the doors was now visible.

The barrel was there. Pointing directly at his head. Exactly where it had been.

"No," he whispered, and was appalled by the sound of his own voice in the silence. "No. I won't look again. I swear it. I won't move. I won't make a sound. I promise you."

He dropped his face into his hands, the room going soft around him. Not for any sum he could name would he have looked again. He sat very still until his heart resumed something approaching its normal function.

The minutes became undifferentiated. The clock in the hall struck the half, the hour, the half again. Three o'clock. Four. Five. Traffic returning faintly. The particular greyness of a London morning arriving at the curtain edges.

Cassian Krane's head drooped forward.

He did not rouse himself.

He slept.

"Mr. Krane. Mr. Krane."

Voices. His wife's voice. Stern's hand on his shoulder. Was that Carrick in the doorway?

He got to his feet, shakily, gripping the armrest.

"Mr. Krane," said Stern, with the blank bewilderment of a man confronting a situation his considerable experience has not prepared him for, "have you not been to bed?"

"What time—" said Krane. "What time is—"

Sir Richard Carrick, who had formed the private hypothesis that Krane had simply had one of his longer evenings, allowed himself a discreet smile.

"Pull yourself together," he said. "Splash some water on your face and put on a jacket. Not the pyjamas—the blue one on the chair. You're receiving a visitor in here; we can't make him wait."

"A visitor?" said Krane, pressing both hands to the sides of his head. "What visitor?"

It had been his ambition for several years to have a serving member of the Cabinet beneath his roof. He had made no secret of

the ambition, and had offered Carrick what Carrick considered a rather vulgar sum if he could manage it by Christmas.

Krane's mind was still a furious chaos. Were the horrors of the night genuinely behind him, or was he still sitting in the chair, asleep?

Renwick, of *The Gleaner*, pressed through the doorway and seized both his hands. Krane went the colour of old paste.

"Mr. Krane," said Renwick, with a warmth that was not entirely professional, "at moments like this all formality is beside the point. A great public act speaks for itself, in any room, at any hour, in any state of dress. It is my genuine honour to introduce the Marquess of Ashford, Chancellor of the Exchequer."

Krane turned towards the door.

The Marquess of Ashford entered. He was a tall, well-made man in his middle sixties, carrying himself with the particular upright ease of someone who has spent forty years in rooms where others adjusted to him rather than the reverse. He wore a dark suit and the expression of a man performing an act of genuine generosity towards the person he was visiting.

"No apologies, Mr. Krane," he began, with the measured assurance of a Commons dispatch box address. "I will simply not hear of them. This informality—this complete absence of ceremony—tells me everything I need to know about the spirit in which your donation was made. A man acting from genuine public feeling does not think about appearances. That, Mr. Krane, is the mark of the thing."

Renwick was writing.

"I should tell you," continued the Chancellor, settling into the room as though he had visited it many times, "that when the call came from *The Gleaner* at six this morning, I was already at my desk. The rough-sleeping crisis has been the central concern of my tenure, as those who have followed my work at the Treasury will know. When significant private capital aligns itself with that concern, I consider it my duty—and my pleasure—to acknowledge it personally. Your donation, Mr. Krane, together with that of Baron Marburg, whom I am informed has matched your contribution, demonstrates that the business community of this country understands its stake in the social fabric. I cannot recall, in recent memory, a private act of generosity that has given me more genuine satisfaction."

"Hear, hear," murmured Renwick, writing still faster.

"Moreover," said the Marquess, permitting himself a slight pause for effect, "your example will, I have no doubt, encourage others. The fund, which *The Gleaner* has agreed to administer on behalf of the partnership of charities involved, now stands at a very considerable figure, and the announcements we shall be able to make this week regarding the establishment of new services will reflect the generosity of all who have contributed. Mr. Krane—your hand."

The room, which had acquired several additional people in the last few minutes—a photographer, two members of the Chancellor's office, Lydia Krane in a state of suppressed

bewilderment—contracted around Cassian Krane in a blur of handshakes and flashguns.

"Socially," murmured Carrick in his ear, "you are made."

"Financially," replied Krane, through a fixed smile, "I am ruined."

Lydia Krane, who had been attempting to read her husband's face for the past five minutes, appeared at his other elbow.

"Is there anything you'd like to say for the piece?" Renwick enquired, notebook open. "We're running a photograph with it and—"

Another flash. Krane blinked.

"Say," said Krane, "that I believe I have lost my mind, and that I'm almost certain Marburg has lost his as well."

Renwick laughed and treated this as the wit of a happy man, and departed with his copy.

"Have you got a headache, darling?" Lydia Krane enquired, with the gentle concern of a woman fairly certain her husband has done something catastrophic.

"No headache," said Krane. "A pain in the bank account. I'm a ruined man. I'll be the joke of the whole City."

Stern reappeared.

"Stern," said Krane, glancing about the room in a way he hoped appeared casual, "what did you do with the things on the table here? When you came in?"

Stern looked at the table.

"There was nothing on the table, Mr. Krane."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. You were asleep in the chair."

"Who came in first this morning?"

"I believe I did. I can't be entirely certain."

Krane studied the pale, composed face of his chief of staff with the careful attention of a man trying to read something that is not quite offering itself to be read.

"And there were no cards on the table. No cheque book."

"No."

"You're sure you were first in?"

"As I said, I believe so."

"Why do you ask?" said Lydia, her anxiety sharpening.

"Just clearing something up," said Krane. "For my own amusement."

Carrick returned from having conducted the Chancellor to his car. He was carrying a first edition copy of *The Gleaner*: the digital edition had been updated and printed, somehow, within the hour.

"They've got it in the early run," he said, holding it up.

"When did you send the cheque—last night, before the dinner?"

"Don't," said Krane.

"Don't what?" said Carrick, looking at him curiously.

"You've done something rather clever, actually. I wish you'd told me. It wanted careful handling and you've managed it beautifully. The Marquess has been holding off formally recognising you here because of the mortgage situation—but you've forced his hand now. He can't visit, personally, and then withhold a K. And if a K

leads to a release of the mortgage—gracefully, naturally, on your part—both sides come out ahead.”

“I’ll do it gracefully,” said Krane. “I’m getting a great deal of practice at throwing fortunes away and smiling while I do it.”

This puzzled Carrick, who looked to Lydia Krane for an explanation. She gave him a small, worried shrug.

“Go and get dressed, both of you,” said Krane, with the irritability of a man who cannot begin to explain himself. “I’m perfectly well. I’ve simply become a patriot overnight. Leave me alone for half an hour.”

They left him.

As the door closed, Cassian Krane turned and looked fully and directly at the wardrobe.

The barrel was still there. Pointing steadily at his head through the gap in the doors, exactly as it had been all night.

He stood for a long moment.

Then he walked to the wardrobe and threw it open.

In the pocket of a hanging suit jacket, the chrome bar of a suit valet had been positioned so that its end protruded through the gap in the doors, pointed precisely at eye level across the room.

Krane stared at it for a very long time.

“My God,” he said at last, very quietly. “He left the moment he had the cheque. And I sat here all night.”

CHAPTER NINE

ES-SINDIBAD OF CADOGAN GARDENS

Upon the evening following the ill-omened banquet in Park Lane, a second dinner party was held in Cadogan Gardens. Like the true gourmets we have become in the pursuit of this narrative, we must be present.

It was close upon the dining hour.

"Zoe is late," said Lady Marchwood.

"Not yet, dear," her husband corrected her, consulting the vintage chronometer he wore with the satisfaction of a man who has found at least one domain in which he is entirely reliable. "They have precisely one minute in which to demonstrate the efficiency of American methods."

"Thank you—Greenwich!" smiled her vivacious ladyship, for whom her husband's passion for punctuality was the single most legible feature of his character.

"You must allow," said Lord Marchwood to Brandt, the novelist, who stood nearby, "that it's a national characteristic. The Yankee promise of efficiency and the rather different reality."

"Lady Marchwood is a committed American," agreed the writer. "I gather your view of the nation differs somewhat from hers?"

"I don't seriously contend—not when Sheila is in earshot—that their methods aren't smart. But the smartness is all surface, d'you see? Look at these Pinkerton fellows Hollister has brought over."

"Those who called on you this morning?"

"Yes. Sent over specifically to hunt Anton Mercator. Private American security at its finest. And the result?"

"They haven't caught him," said Brandt.

"Exactly. Though in fairness," he added, catching his wife's eye across the room and performing a brief pantomime with his watch, "neither has Scotland Yard."

He was mid-performance when Miss Hollister was announced, and Lady Marchwood permitted herself a small, satisfied smile.

Zoe Hollister entered with the natural ease of a woman who has been beautiful long enough to take it entirely for granted. Her chestnut hair was pinned with the slightly improvised assurance of someone who had changed quickly and did not particularly mind. Her eyes were, as always, her most compelling feature: dark, direct, measuring, never still. She was wearing her father's money with the same unconscious confidence she wore everything, which is to say she wore it as though it were simply part of her, and not especially interesting.

"Zoe!" said Lady Marchwood. "Where's your father?"

"Couldn't make it," said Zoe, composedly. "He sent his apologies and no explanation. He said to say he's sorry, and to tell you the car will come back for me after dinner. I can't be too late."

Lord Marchwood adopted the philosophical expression of a man accustomed to American commerce overriding English social arrangements.

"Les affaires!" he said.

Dinner was announced, and the company received this intelligence with the slightly pained surprise that English dinner guests invariably affect at the intrusion of the meal upon the pre-dinner drinks.

Then Marchwood made a discovery.

"Sheila," he said, lowering his voice, "we're thirteen."

His wife made a rapid count and coloured slightly.

"Anyone might do it," she said. "And it's entirely Mr. Hollister's fault for not coming."

"Oh, you're surely not going to make a fuss about a number," said Zoe Hollister. "In New York, thirteen would just mean a good table."

"A lot of people feel quite strongly about it," said Lady Marchwood. "I shan't mind myself, naturally. But some of the others might."

Brandt, who had followed this exchange with an expression of mild literary interest, strolled forward.

"We are thirteen, I collect," he said.

"We are," said Marchwood, "though I don't suppose anyone else has counted."

"A thought occurs to me," said the novelist, with the slight smile of a man proposing something he knows will be resisted. "It requires a degree of Arabian hospitality to carry off."

"Go on, Mr. Brandt!" said Zoe, who was already entertained.

"On the precedent of Es-Sindibad of the Sea, who never sat down to eat without first summoning some chance wayfarer to share

the table—why not send out, and invite the first suitable gentleman who passes?"

"I mean to say—" began Marchwood.

"The strict observance would require finding a pious soul who tarries in Cadogan Gardens to extol the Almighty," Brandt continued amiably, "but I suspect the soup would not survive the wait. You are a gentleman short, I think? Let us say simply: the first gentleman in evening dress."

"He might be anyone," protested Marchwood. "A waiter, a driver—"

"Evening dress is our criterion of respectability," said Brandt. "It is a flimsy criterion, but it is the one civilisation has generally settled on."

"Oh, Jerry, let's!" cried Zoe. "It's wonderful. Make him do it, Sheila."

"That's settled, Zoe," said Lady Marchwood serenely. "Alexander!"

The footman addressed himself to her with an expression that suggested he had learned, over several years of employment, to suppress his reactions entirely.

"You will step out to the front gate and say to the first gentleman you see, provided he is in evening dress: 'Lady Marchwood requests the pleasure of your company at dinner.' If he says he doesn't know her ladyship, you are to say that she is entirely aware of that. Do you follow?"

Alexander's face achieved a remarkable stillness.

"I have to stand outside in Cadogan Gardens, my lady, and—"

"You have five minutes. Show the gentleman into the library."

Alexander withdrew with the bearing of a man composing his letter of resignation as he walked.

"I claim him, whoever he is," declared Zoe Hollister. "He shall take me in to dinner."

"What I mean to say," resumed Marchwood, "is that at a proper house party, at Christmas, with people one knew—"

"Think of the possibilities," said his wife, patting his arm. "This is exactly the kind of thing that New York would adore."

They had barely reached the library before Alexander returned. His expression was that of a man who has performed a difficult duty and is not ungrateful for the symmetry of suffering it. In a perfectly toneless voice he announced:

"Detective-Inspector Stannard."

"I mean to say—a policeman—" began Marchwood, but his wife was already across the room.

In the corner, Zoe Hollister had covered her mouth with her hand and was making her way towards the window with the urgent privacy of someone who is about to laugh at a volume unsuitable for a library.

The guest entered.

From her corner, Zoe Hollister looked at him, and her laughter stopped.

Lady Marchwood looked pleased. Her husband looked surprised. Brandt, in the doorway, watched the stranger arrive with an expression that was careful and considered.

Detective-Inspector Stannard was a tall man, evidently fit, with the easy and slightly compressed bearing of someone who has spent time in the field. He was bronzed, wore a short beard trimmed to a point, and had come to rest in the centre of the room with the composed smile of a man who encounters unusual situations professionally and has made his peace with them. His evening clothes fitted with a precision that Lord Marchwood (whose sartorial opinions were strong and frequently expressed) noted, reluctantly, was beyond criticism. He looked, in short, like an extremely capable and well-resourced Colonial gentleman, which was the last thing anyone had expected Alexander to produce.

"This pleasure is all the greater for being unexpected, Lady Marchwood," he said. "I suspect I am here to fill a gap. Shall I guess—your party numbered thirteen?"

The infectious quality of his smile, combined with an entirely natural acceptance of an absurd social situation, crossed the room ahead of him and smoothed what might otherwise have been a very awkward interval. Lord Marchwood, who had formed the idea that detective-inspectors were solid, serviceable men in practical shoes, revised his position substantially within forty-five seconds of the man's arrival. He found himself offering a hand.

"Very good of you," he said. "You're quite certain you haven't a previous engagement? I'd hate to impose."

"None whatsoever. I am, technically, on duty; but the Yard takes a liberal view of physical sustenance."

"I wonder," said Marchwood, with the faint discomfort of a man who knows he is about to be graceless about something and is going to do it anyway, "whether you'd object to being introduced to the other guests simply as—Mr. Stannard? The connection to official business might—give people ideas."

He felt, even as he said it, that he was being somewhat offensive about something that didn't require it.

"Not in the least. I should have suggested it myself."

Marchwood was aware, with faint indignation, that he felt obscurely grateful for this.

Lady Marchwood had a well-established taste for interesting people, and the house in Cadogan Gardens had seen enough of them that an unannounced addition to a dinner table was taken more or less in stride. Mr. Stannard, who escorted Zoe Hollister in to dinner, proved to be the kind of person who makes those seated near him wonder, afterward, why the conversation at other tables had seemed so unrewarding. Zoe Hollister, for her part, became so thoroughly engaged that her cousin—Lady Marchwood—glanced down the table twice in mild concern. Zoe had a history of enthusiasms.

Lady Marchwood was wearing, this evening, the Lyrpa Diamond: a stone of some celebrity, the centrepiece of a collar that her father had commissioned for her mother. It was the kind of object

that people looked at twice and then found themselves discussing at length, which was precisely what was happening now. The conversation had moved, by natural degrees, from the stone itself to notable stones in general, and from there—as almost every conversation in London was eventually finding its way—to the question of Anton Mercator.

Brandt was in the middle of a discussion of the famous Kimberley mail robbery of 1883.

“A significant haul,” he said. “Twelve thousand pounds' worth of rough stones, by the accounts I've read.”

“Fifteen,” corrected Bernard Tarrant, from across the table. Tarrant was the director of a mining syndicate with interests across three continents, and the kind of man who corrected figures as a reflex. “I know the file. Three men taken, one dead. The fourth got away clean, with everything—and was never traced. The stones either.”

“A professional, then,” said Brandt.

“Entirely. Left no thread to pull.”

“Which Anton Mercator has rather beaten, in his way,” said Marchwood. “Though his methods are rather harder to categorise.”

Lady Marchwood seized the opening.

“Mr. Stannard,” she said, “Zoe tells me you have been discussing Mercator. I suspect you know a great deal more than you've said.”

“I know what's in the files,” said Stannard, with the slight smile of someone drawing a careful distinction. “And I have a

theory, which is a different thing. The files are thin. The theory, however—"

He paused, and the table waited with the particular quiet that falls over a dinner party when someone says something that suggests the evening is about to become interesting.

"Please," said Zoe.

"The first notable point," said Stannard, setting down his glass, "is the pattern of the targets. His victims have not been selected at random, nor by wealth alone. Your man Stern noticed it—it's been reported. Every person compelled to contribute has a documented connection to a specific act of financial extraction: a workforce eliminated without recourse, a pension fund redirected, assets moved to jurisdictions chosen for their opacity. Mercator's people have done their research. The intelligence that underpins his operations is not the kind you acquire casually. It requires either extraordinary resources, or extraordinary access, or both."

"A state actor?" suggested Tarrant.

"If it were a state, we'd know. States leave traces of a particular kind, and none of those traces exist here. What we have is a private network, of considerable scale, whose members are demonstrably loyal—which is, in some respects, more remarkable than the robberies themselves. Not one informant. Not one defection. In an operation of this size, over this period of time, that is almost without precedent."

The table had gone very quiet.

"What does that tell you?" asked Brandt. He had the focused attention of a man listening not as a guest but as a professional.

"It tells me," said Stannard, "that the loyalty isn't purchased. Purchased loyalty fractures under sufficient pressure—money always has a price. This loyalty appears to be given. Which means Mercator commands it by something other than payment. Belief, perhaps. Or the particular authority of someone whose cause those around him find genuinely compelling."

"A fanatic," said Tarrant.

"Fanatics are disorganised," said Stannard. "They are also rarely as precise. Consider what Mercator has done and has not done. He returns what he borrows. He distributes what he extracts. He targets the guilty and leaves everyone else alone. No innocent person has been harmed in any of his operations. That is not the profile of fanaticism—that is the profile of a man acting from a very settled, very specific ethical framework, which he has thought about carefully and at length."

"Which framework?" asked Zoe.

"That's the interesting question." Stannard leaned back slightly. "He doesn't act like a revolutionary. He doesn't want the system abolished. He wants it to perform what it already claims to perform—the distribution of obligation alongside wealth, the accountability of those who hold power. He's not replacing the system. He's correcting it. From the outside, using methods the inside has decided not to apply."

A moment's silence.

"You make him sound almost reasonable," said Lady Marchwood.

"He's extremely reasonable," said Stannard. "That's what makes him so very difficult to stop. A reasonable man with access to considerable resources and an impeccable sense of timing is a great deal more dangerous than an unreasonable one."

"And who is he?" asked Zoe. "What is he? Where does he come from?"

"Ah," said Stannard, and picked up his glass. "There you have the question I cannot answer from the files, because it isn't in them. I have a private view, for what it's worth. I believe Anton Mercator is someone who has seen, from very close quarters and over a very long time, what happens when wealth becomes entirely self-referential—when it accumulates without obligation and extracts without consequence. I believe he finds this not merely unjust but personally intolerable, in the way that people find intolerable only those things they consider to be a direct violation of something they hold sacred. And I believe his network is built on others who share that particular kind of intolerance."

He spoke more rapidly now, with the compression of a man who has thought about a subject for a long time and is unfolding it for the first time to an audience.

"He operates as a corrective mechanism for a system that has lost the ability to correct itself. Whether that makes him a criminal or something rather harder to classify—I leave to each of you to decide."

The sigh that ran through the table as he concluded was the sound of people who have been holding their breath.

"Is he in the Secret Service?" a woman whispered to her neighbour.

It was at that moment that a footman appeared at the door.

"Mr. Tarrant is wanted on the telephone, my lady."

"How inconvenient," said Lady Marchwood.

"I've said my piece, in any case," said Stannard pleasantly.

"It's a theory, nothing more. I hold it privately; though I notice a writer in *The Gleaner* seems to have arrived at something similar by a different route."

He reached for his wine glass, and in doing so his right hand turned briefly in the candlelight. The stone in his ring—old, green, its depths seeming to contain something that moved when the light caught it—gleamed for a moment, purely, before his hand turned back.

Zoe Hollister had not taken her eyes from him.

CHAPTER TEN

KIMBERLEY

The dessert had been placed on the table and the conversation upon Mercator had settled into the animated general exchange of people who find the subject impossible to leave, when Bernard Tarrant returned from the telephone.

He was white. Not pale-white. The self-possessed mining executive who had crossed the room ten minutes ago had been replaced by a man who was visibly shaking and making a poor job of concealing it.

"Marchwood," he said. "A word."

The host, who had no particular feeling for Tarrant either way, rose from the table in some surprise and stepped into the corridor with him.

"I am a ruined man," said Tarrant flatly. "My flat in Victoria Street has been broken into. My safe rifled."

"Good Lord—"

"You don't understand," said Tarrant, cutting across him. "I cannot explain. It is Anton Mercator."

"You're certain?"

"It can only be Mercator. I must go at once. I need to see exactly what has happened. I'll have to contact the police."

"There is actually no need to look far for a police officer," said Marchwood, with the slight awkwardness of a man disclosing something that sounds improbable. "The man speaking to

Miss Hollister—Detective—Inspector Stannard. He is in charge of the Mercator investigation."

Tarrant stared at him.

"A detective? At your dinner table?"

"It is a long story," said Marchwood. "The practical point is that he is here."

Too agitated to spend very long on this piece of information, Tarrant went through to the side room, and was joined almost immediately by Marchwood and Stannard. The detective began at once.

"I understand your flat has been burgled, and that you believe it to be the work of Anton Mercator? By one of those curious instances that life produces more frequently than fiction, I am the officer in charge of the Mercator case, jointly with Chief Inspector Bingham."

"Before we go any further," said Tarrant, with the edge of a man who is frightened and is rendering it as aggression, "I do not share your theories about him."

"That is entirely your prerogative," replied Stannard, unruffled. "It will not affect my interest in apprehending him. Tell me: when was the break-in?"

"While my housekeeper was out on an errand this evening. He returned to find the safe open and emptied. He rang me immediately."

"Have you been in contact with Scotland Yard about Mercator previously?"

"Yes. He had threatened me."

"By what means?"

Tarrant's jaw tightened. "The point is that he has now rifled my safe."

"Did the safe contain valuables?"

"Certainly."

"Diamonds?"

"It contained important papers."

"The safe's location?"

"Concealed at the back of a bookcase. No other person has a key. No one—including my housekeeper—knows where it is. How in God's name Mercator has found it is beyond any—"

He stopped. He was looking, with some difficulty, at Stannard's eyes.

"An examination of the flat may give us something to work with," said Stannard. "Shall we go?"

"I have no car here this evening," said Marchwood. "I'll have someone call one."

He moved towards the bell.

"I couldn't help overhearing," came a voice from the doorway.

Zoe Hollister stood there in the long driving coat she had pulled on over her dinner things, her eyes bright with the particular alertness of someone who suspects the evening is about to become considerably more interesting than it was.

"My car's outside. I was on my way to pick up Pa. I can easily go by way of Victoria Street."

"That is very kind, Zoe," said Marchwood. "Inspector Stannard and Mr. Tarrant need to get there quickly."

"Is it a burglary?" she asked, looking from one to the other. "A real one?"

"Apparently so," said Stannard.

"Come along then," said Zoe. "I'm glad I didn't go home yet."

The three of them departed. In the car, Stannard sat beside the driver's side and said very little. Tarrant sat behind, occupied with his own thoughts, which were clearly not comfortable ones. Zoe drove with the brisk competence of someone who knows London's side streets better than most, and permitted herself only one glance in the mirror at Stannard, which he did not appear to notice.

When the car drew up in Victoria Street, Stannard turned to her.

"I would ask you not to come in, Miss Hollister."

"Why ever not? I brought you here."

"I have a reason. A good one." He met her eyes with a directness she found, afterward, very difficult to describe. "If you would carry out your original plan and go on to join your father, it would be better."

She considered this.

"Will you come to the hotel tomorrow and tell me about it? Pa will be out all morning."

"If you tell no one about the appointment, and arrange to be alone—yes. At eleven o'clock."

Her eyes widened slightly. "You are the most mysterious man I've ever had at a dinner table," she said. "All right. Eleven o'clock."

"I shall be punctual."

He stepped out, closed the car door, and was through the building's entrance behind Tarrant before she had fully registered that he had gone.

Up the stairs, two at a time, and Tarrant was already at his flat door, key in hand. He pushed it open.

"Hobbs!" he called.

No answer. The flat lay quiet, its lights off, the rooms undisturbed in their evening stillness.

"He must have gone straight to the police," said Stannard, stepping in behind him. "Where is the safe?"

Tarrant snapped on the lights and unlocked a door to the left of the entrance hall. It gave onto a study: orderly, book-lined, two desk lamps spreading their green light over surfaces that were perfectly undisturbed. Nothing out of place. Not a book displaced, not a drawer pulled.

"There are no signs of a break-in here," said Stannard, in a tone of mild surprise.

"Hobbs may have closed the safe door when he found it," said Tarrant. His voice had acquired a slight tremor.

He wheeled a chair to the tall bookcase and stepped up on it, running his hands along the top of the shelves. He lifted away a small framed print from the wall beside it and, reaching inside his collar, produced a key on a slender chain that he wore

around his neck. He inserted it in a lock concealed behind where the picture had hung.

A sharp, involuntary sound escaped him.

"It has not been opened at all," he said. His voice was strange.

He pulled at the cord of the overhead light, flooding the study brightly, and with hands that moved in rapid agitation began pulling books from the shelves nearest to the concealed lock, directing the light into the cavity that opened as he did so. He plunged his arm in, swept out several boxes and a bound stack of legal documents, pushed his arm in farther, found a spring concealed at the back wall, and pressed it.

A click. A second, smaller compartment disclosed itself.

"That, at least, has not been touched!" he said. His voice had a wild note of relief in it now. He reached in and produced a large sealed envelope—sealed in half a dozen places, in the manner of something important. "That is safe, Inspector. That has not—"

"You are wrong, William Brand," said Stannard, and in one fluid movement took the envelope from the other's hand.

The man on the chair lurched. Every trace of colour left his face—the natural ruddiness, the flush of agitation, everything—and what remained was the particular greyish pallor of a man to whom something has happened that he has spent decades in careful preparation to prevent.

He thrust one hand towards his jacket pocket.

"Both hands up," said Stannard. His voice was entirely level. The revolver he held was steady, pointed precisely, and did not move by a fraction.

Bernard Tarrant raised his arms. He stood on the chair above the open bookcase and looked down at the man below him, and the expression in his eyes was not anger—it was, Stannard thought, something closer to recognition.

"It is by such faithfulness to our own history," said Stannard, with a calm that was not unkind, "that we are always eventually found out, Brand. You had those papers very well hidden. I confess I had almost despaired of locating them myself."

He backed towards the open door, tucking the envelope inside his coat.

"Inspector Stannard," said Bernard Tarrant, swallowing between the words with some difficulty, "I will remember you."

"You will be wasting the effort," replied the man addressed. He reached into his breast pocket and sent a small card spinning across the carpet. Then he was through the door.

The key turned in the lock from outside.

Tarrant heard the footsteps on the stairs, unhurried, descending. He heard the street door. Then nothing.

He descended from the chair with no particular grace. He stood in the middle of his study and understood, without rushing the understanding, exactly what had happened: the call to the dinner party that had not been from his housekeeper; the detective who had appeared with such convenient timing; the drive

to Victoria Street; the safe he had revealed in his panic, the envelope he had produced with his own hands.

He bent and picked up the card from the carpet.

When Hobbs returned half an hour later, having been waylaid in the pub on the corner by a chance acquaintance of extraordinary sociability, he found the study locked from the inside. His repeated knocking produced no response. He went for the building manager, and the two of them forced the door.

Bernard Tarrant was in his chair, breathing shallowly, his face the colour of old wax. A medical emergency team arrived within eight minutes. In his right hand, which had been clenched into a fist and showed no sign of relaxing it, was a small card, crumpled, creased, its text barely visible.

It read:

ANTON MERCATOR

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MR. TARLETON VISITS THE HOTEL ASTORIA

Mr. J. J. Hollister and his daughter were at breakfast the following morning at the Astoria. Hollister was absorbed in *The Gleaner*.

"Zoe," he said suddenly. "This is something else."

His voice had the particular quality of a man who has spent decades in rooms where unpleasant news was delivered and has learned to receive it in a register that conveys nothing.

Zoe looked up. She had been diligently searching through several morning papers for any mention of the Victoria Street incident. There was none.

"Something about Mercator, Pa?"

"Take a look at this." He folded the paper and slid it across. "Cassian Krane in his dressing room. The Chancellor of the Exchequer holding his hand. Baron Marburg in the corner. Elworth in the other. Now you tell me that is spontaneous philanthropy and I will believe you, because I am a very credulous man."

"Oh!" said Zoe softly. "He managed all three in one night?"

"He managed all three," said Hollister, with the dryness of desert sand. "There is precisely one way that Cassian Krane writes a cheque for a hundred thousand pounds, and it involves someone at the other end of a firearm. You will have noticed, if you have been reading these reports carefully, which I doubt, that Halford gave a hundred thousand to a children's hospital,

and that Marburg contributed five hundred thousand to the homelessness fund, and that Krane contributed another hundred thousand to the same. That is seven hundred thousand pounds raised for charitable purposes in the city of London, by a man the Metropolitan Police have been unable to locate, in approximately two weeks. I find this alarming."

"Why alarming? The money seems to be going to good causes."

"The money," said Hollister, with great patience, "is *my* money. Not yet—not literally—but mine in principle, and in intention, and in due course. He's done me once with the Canadian facility. He's got me booked for what I estimate at another half million, given my British interests. Possibly more. Halford and Hartmann still owe their share. And you're talking about good causes."

"I was going to ask you for two new hats," said Zoe.

Her father looked at her for a long moment.

"Zoe," he said. "Of all the attributes you did not inherit from your mother, the most remarkable is her complete indifference to capital."

"She was very serene," said Zoe.

"She was impractical," said Hollister. "I've got to go upstairs and see Royce. He's the Pinkerton man I brought over. Perhaps he can explain to me why I am, apparently, paying for the privilege of his company as well as everyone else's."

He left.

Zoe sat alone in the breakfast room for exactly four minutes. Then her maid appeared. There was a gentleman to see her; he had not left a card.

"Show him into the sitting room," said Zoe, "and if Mr. Hollister returns, please tell him I'm engaged."

She went through to the small hotel sitting room, filled with an excitement she was trying to moderate into something more composed. She was about to be shown what lay behind the curtain; she was, she felt, on the edge of something that would resolve itself differently from anything she had anticipated.

Her visitor entered.

She made a small, quick sound of surprise.

This was not Detective-Inspector Stannard.

The man who stood, smiling, in the doorway was taller than Stannard had been, and thinner: a lean, upright figure in a dark morning coat that fitted with the same extraordinary precision as the dress coat had fitted the inspector the night before. He had black hair worn slightly long, and a face of the kind that the word *handsome* does not quite reach—a face whose quality was not beauty in the conventional sense but something more specific: a precision of feature that suggested a person made with unusual intentionality, each element in the right place and doing exactly what it was meant to do. His eyes were large and dark and moved with an intelligence that was wholly focused, even in the act of smiling.

He was like no one she had met before, and she was certain, in the instant of seeing him, that she had been waiting, at some

level she could not have named, to meet exactly this kind of person.

She was afraid, but not in a way she entirely wanted to stop.

"You are not Inspector Stannard," she said.

"No," he agreed pleasantly. "I am not Inspector Stannard. There is, in fact, no Inspector Stannard."

"What do you mean?"

She felt a flash of something close to anger: she was not a woman accustomed to being managed.

"Be good enough to explain yourself. If you deceived Lady Marchwood last night—if you are not actually a detective—what are you? Who are you?"

"The second question would take rather longer to answer than we have. As for the first—I will try." He moved easily into the room and stopped at a comfortable conversational distance, not sitting. "Last night I told you of a man whose purpose, as I described it, was to hold accountable those who hold power without the obligation that power carries. I told you that the loyalty of his organisation arises from belief rather than payment, and that it has never been broken. Do you remember?"

"I remember everything you said last night," she said, which was true.

"I also arranged last night's dinner—or certain elements of it. I arranged for your father to be detained so that the party should number thirteen. One of my friends, already a guest, proposed the custom of Es-Sindibad. I presented myself as

available on the pavement of Cadogan Gardens. Is that the work of a common criminal?"

She stared at him.

"That is the work of someone who had a great deal of advance information about a private dinner party," she said.

"Yes," he said. "It is." There was no apology in it.

"And Tarrant? Victoria Street?"

"I caused Tarrant's housekeeper to be absent while a message was sent from elsewhere in his name. I needed Tarrant to lead me to a safe he would not have shown me voluntarily. It contained documents proving that Bernard Tarrant of the Uitland Rans Syndicate and William Brand, who escaped with the proceeds of the Kimberley mail robbery in 1883, were the same person. He has evaded the law for forty years. He has not evaded me."

"And who," said Zoe, "are you?"

He looked at her steadily for a moment.

"I am someone," he said at last, "who comes from a long tradition of people who believed that the extraction of wealth from the many by the few, without obligation or return, is not merely unjust but a specific and correctable wrong. That tradition is older than any legal system currently operating in this city, or any other. It has survived the collapse of more governments and institutions than I can name to you. And it requires, from time to time, a person willing to act on it directly."

His face had lit with a quiet intensity—not the wild enthusiasm of a fanatic, but the still fire of someone who has

thought about a thing for a very long time and is now simply stating what they know to be true.

"I have been called a thief," he continued. "An arsonist. A brigand. Perhaps some of those things are technically accurate. But upon the word of a man who has never taken anything for himself—upon the honour of Anton Mercator—I tell you that everything I have done in this city has been done in the service of that tradition, and not one penny has left my hands for my own benefit."

The name, spoken by himself, hung in the air between them. She had known, nearly from the moment he walked in. She had known it the way you know, sometimes, a thing that you have not yet been told.

"You have placed yourself outside every law," she said. "You could be arrested at any hour."

"That is a risk I carry with full knowledge of it," he said. "Though the organisation, as you may have gathered, is rather more extensive than the police currently estimate."

"What will become of you?"

He smiled. "What I have done will be remembered, or it will not. What matters is that it was done."

"Last night," she said slowly, "you said something about arranging the dinner in order to be there. You said you caused my father to be detained."

"Yes."

"You mean that my father being there was an accident, but your being there was not?"

"Precisely."

She looked at him. He looked back, without moving, perfectly composed, with those dark and luminous eyes that had the quality of someone who has nowhere else to be and no other concern.

"What would you want me to do," she asked, "if you had half a million pounds to dispose of?"

"I am asking you that question," he said.

She was quiet for a moment.

"Return what can be returned to whoever it belongs to," she said finally. "And with what cannot be returned—build homes by the sea for sick city children."

He moved his left hand slightly, and she saw the ring: the green stone, settled in its setting as though it had been there since before the setting was made, the device within it catching the morning light from the window and holding something that moved. She felt it the way you feel, occasionally, the presence of a very old building: something in it that is larger than itself and does not require explanation.

"It shall be done," said Anton Mercator. "And will you be my friend?"

"I will try," she said. "If you wish it. But—truly—I think you are wrong, not in what you are trying to do, but in the way you are doing it. You are making enemies. You are making the people who should support your aims afraid of you. There is—there *must* be—some better way."

He looked at her with an expression she could not read entirely.

"Perhaps you are right," he said. "Perhaps I am. Time will settle it."

The door of the suite opened. Behind Zoe's shoulder, Hollister's voice.

She turned. Her father stood in the doorway; and behind him, a large, quiet man in a well-cut serge suit who had the alert eyes of someone professionally trained to notice things.

Anton Mercator was gone. The door to the corridor was open two inches. He had moved with the complete absence of sound of a person who has had considerable practice at it.

"Thought you had a visitor, Zoe," said Hollister. "There's a gentleman here wanted to have a look at him."

He turned to the man beside him.

"Inspector Bingham would like to ask you something," said Hollister. "Inspector Bingham, New Scotland Yard."

"Sorry to trouble you, Miss Hollister," said Bingham, who had the manner of a man who is considerably more observant than he allows to appear. "I've been following someone this morning—believe he came into this hotel. I rather think he may have come up here."

"What is he like, this person?" she asked, looking past both of them at a point on the wall.

"This morning? About the handsomest man I've seen in a professional capacity, miss. Though he may have altered since I last saw him—he's the most versatile individual I've come across in my career to date."

"What do you want him for?"

Bingham raised an eyebrow. "He's Anton Mercator. Does your visitor answer to the description?"

"My visitor," said Zoe, keeping her voice level, "was a gentleman who is raising funds for coastal homes for city children. He wanted to discuss a donation." She met Bingham's eyes with the direct and utterly guileless expression that beautiful women who have had extensive practice at society can produce on very short notice. "You have made a considerable mistake, Inspector."

Bingham bowed, excused himself, and left the room.

Mr. Hollister stood for a moment studying his daughter with the particular attention of a man who has spent forty years reading people's faces across a negotiating table. Then he followed the inspector.

Zoe went to her room, sat down, and looked out of the window for some time without seeing anything. She was aware that she had, in those twenty seconds by the door, taken a step of some kind. She was not yet certain what it meant, but she felt the weight of it.

When she came down to the hotel lounge twenty minutes later, her father was in the far corner deep in conversation with a lean, clean-shaven man in an American tweed suit who wore a tilted Stetson and smoked a cheroot with the unhurried purpose of someone who has been smoking cheroots since before most people in the room were born. This was Aloys X. Royce of Pinkerton's. The conversation was clearly professional.

And at that moment, a tall figure appeared at her elbow.

Zoe drew a sharp, involuntary breath.

She knew what the two men in the corner were discussing. She knew what they were attempting to solve. She was entirely clear on the fact that the living solution to the problem they were working on was standing beside her in the lounge of the Hotel Astoria, six feet from a Pinkerton operative and eight feet from a Scotland Yard inspector who had just left and might return at any moment.

"Please go," she whispered. "I thought you had left."

"I had a room here before your party arrived last evening," he said, in a voice perfectly calibrated to carry no further than her ear. "It would have looked rather remarkable if I had checked out immediately. But there is also something more I wished to say, and I was interrupted."

"There is a detective with my father—"

"I know him well. Fortunately, the acquaintance is not mutual at present. For today, my name is Mr. Tarleton. I have taken this risk—which is, I assure you, rather less than it appears—because I want to offer your father one genuine opportunity before I act."

"And if I simply called out to him?"

He looked at her with an expression that was not fear and was not quite amusement. "Then you would do so. I impose nothing upon you. If you consider me to be what the papers call me—denounce me, to anyone you choose. You will find me at any time at Linden Cottage, Dulwich Village. I place no constraint on you that you cannot remove in thirty seconds."

She said nothing. He had understood something about her correctly. She was not going to call out.

"Come," he said, quite naturally, "and introduce me."

Hollister and Royce looked up as Zoe approached with a stranger.

"Father, I don't believe you've met Mr. Tarleton? Mr. Tarleton—my father—and Mr. Royce."

Hollister nodded shortly with the assessment of a man who sizes up a face quickly and files it. Royce moved his cheroot from one corner of his mouth to the other and watched with eyes that had the flatness of a professional observer who knows how to look without appearing to.

"There is something I am particularly anxious to discuss with you, Mr. Hollister," began Tarleton, with the easy, confident manner of a man proposing a business conversation he fully expects to go his way. "It concerns Anton Mercator."

"That so?" drawled Hollister.

"I hold no brief for Mercator. But on behalf of a significant financial group I have a proposition."

"What group?"

"Shall we say, for the moment, the most influential in the private capital space."

"Elworth?"

"If you choose to interpret it that way."

"Antony Elworth has been trying to convince me that being seen as a philanthropist is good for business," said Hollister. "He's given away enough money to make a point of it. The point

has not reached me. He's been talking about this Mercator fund as if it's the most natural thing in the world."

"So has Baron Marburg. So has Mr. Krane."

"I notice. I notice they were held up at gunpoint in their own houses, and that they then received visits from government ministers who congratulated them publicly and made the whole thing impossible to reverse. I am not laughing at this. I am not amused. If I end up subscribing it will be because somebody had a firearm pointed at me while I was writing the cheque, and I will say so, very clearly, to anyone who asks."

"That is precisely what my associates wish to prevent. They are anxious to know if there is any cause you would voluntarily support. The interest on your capital alone, Mr. Hollister, exceeds what most people in this country earn in a lifetime."

"Thanks," said Hollister. "For a man I've known four minutes you are very well-informed about my finances and surprisingly relaxed about mentioning it. Your associates are evidently experts at deploying other people's money. I've been in business for forty years and I haven't found a cause better suited to support than my own. Give my compliments to Mr. Elworth."

He turned back to Royce.

Tarleton turned to Zoe, who had listened with the expression of someone watching a chess game reach a conclusion she had foreseen several moves ago.

"You see," he said quietly. "He is perfectly impervious."

"Was that the point?" she said. "Were you trying to bring it out, so you had a reason for what you intend to do?"

"Partly. I also wished to offer him one more genuine chance. And I was right to do so. The answer tells me something."

"It tells you he is stubborn and doesn't trust strangers," said Zoe. "That is not exactly a crime."

"No," he said. "His position in Nexcore was a crime. His position in three other facilities in the past four years was a crime. Not a legal crime—not the kind that results in consequences, in the system as it currently operates. The other kind."

She looked at him.

"You have placed me in an impossible situation," she said.

"I don't believe so. If you consider me wrong in what I do—say so, to anyone you choose. The address is Linden Cottage, Dulwich Village. I impose no yoke upon you."

From somewhere deeper in the hotel came a sound that was startling in that context: someone whistling. Clear, sustained, unhurried—a few bars of something Zoe could not immediately identify.

Anton Mercator took both her hands briefly, in that imperative and gentle way she was already beginning to recognise.

"Good-bye," he said. "Perhaps you are right and I am wrong. Time will tell us. If you need to find me, you know where I am."

He turned and went up the staircase.

He had been gone perhaps thirty seconds when Chief Inspector Bingham came back through the lobby door.

Zoe was standing by the foot of the stairs.

"Still here, Miss Hollister," said Bingham pleasantly. "Do you know if your father has gone out yet? I particularly wanted another word with him."

"He's in the lounge with Mr. Royce," she said.

"Ah." Bingham paused. The employment of Pinkerton's was a sore point with him—not that he and Royce were on bad terms, exactly, but the implied commentary on Scotland Yard's capabilities was not lost on anyone, himself included. "You'll forgive me for going back in. We're making progress."

He moved past her towards the lounge.

Whether they were making progress was, Bingham privately admitted to himself, debatable. The organisation surrounding Anton Mercator was proving, with each passing week, to be more extensive, more varied in its membership, and more thoroughly impenetrable than anything in his experience. News from Paris that morning suggested similar activity there. Whoever Anton Mercator was, he was not operating alone, and the loyalty of the people around him was of the kind that did not fracture under routine investigative pressure.

Bingham did not know who Mercator was. He did not know where he came from, or why. But he was increasingly of the view that by the time he found out, the city of London would know it too.

CHAPTER TWELVE

LOVE, LUCRE AND MR. ROYCE

Zoe was waiting for Lady Beatrice Ashford. Lady Beatrice was late—a circumstance less remarkable than it might have been on account of the reason for it, which was that Lady Beatrice had encountered Sir Richard Carrick on the way, and they were now pacing slowly through St. James's Park in the pale autumn sun, apparently in no particular hurry in either direction.

"My situation is becoming impossible, Mary," said Carrick, with a precision that suggested he had been thinking about exactly how to say this for some time. "Every month seems to push the moment further away rather than nearer—when I can say good-bye to Mr. Cassian Krane. My position is little better than that of his social secretary. By hard work, and it is hard work, acting as Krane's guide through whatever part of London society will still receive him—and by a degree of self-suppression that I find increasingly difficult to account for—I have managed to keep myself financially above water. But I have scarcely a shred of self-respect to show for it."

She looked down at the path and said nothing.

"My sense of humour has been the saving of me," he continued. "But there is a limit to how far even a good sense of humour will carry a man. I cannot continue indefinitely as Krane's social mechanism. Yet if I show the slightest sign of independence, he will make things extremely difficult, and I am not in a position to absorb that. Setting aside the distant

prospect of my uncle's title—and he is in excellent health and I sincerely hope he remains so for decades—what have I to offer you, Mary? I am sailing under false colours. I am, in practical terms, a servant of Krane's who does not draw a salary but receives his services instead. Bah."

Lady Beatrice looked up at him with the expression of a woman who disagrees with a self-assessment but understands that disagreeing at this moment will not help.

"You are being too hard on yourself," she said. "What you do is not dishonourable."

"Perhaps not. But how would your father regard it if he understood the arrangement fully?"

She looked down again.

"Is my father involved with Cassian Krane in any financial way, Dick?" she asked, with a directness that she had been building towards for several minutes.

Carrick's laugh had a slightly nervous quality.

"Krane does not extend me the compliment of his full financial confidence," he said. "Stern would know better than I."

"Stern," said Mary. "Yes. He is a remarkable person, isn't he? I have sometimes sat opposite him at one of those dinners and thought that whatever title means, he has the quality of it in a way that most of the people there don't."

Carrick glanced at her with some appreciation.

"I have occasionally felt something similar," he said. "He carries himself as someone entirely self-sufficient—not in a cold way, but in the way of a person who has thought about what he is

and settled the question to his own satisfaction. It makes the social hierarchy feel, in his presence, rather provisional."

"Exactly that," said Mary. "And yet the world he moves in would consider him below us. It's very peculiar."

They walked for a moment in the quiet that comes between two people who have understood each other.

"Do you know," said Mary, dropping her voice without quite intending to, "I have sometimes wondered if Anton Mercator is in some way connected to—I don't know exactly how to put it. To something very old. Something he carries a kind of authority from that none of the rest of us can quite name."

"There is certainly a story circulating," said Carrick. "In the clubs, everywhere. Someone has been spreading a rather romantic account of the man. That his ring, the seal he uses, represent some kind of ancient authority—a lineage of obligation that predates any modern legal structure. That he believes himself answerable to something considerably older than the Metropolitan Police."

"You sound sceptical."

"I am sceptical. He is an accomplished criminal who has cultivated an atmosphere of mystery around himself, because mystery is useful to him. This romantic story that his organisation is the inheritor of some ancient tradition of justice—it's extraordinarily well-designed to produce exactly the kind of sympathy he requires."

"Mrs. Elworth doesn't think so."

Carrick looked at her sharply.

"What has she told you?"

A faint colour appeared in Lady Beatrice's face and passed.

"Nothing that was meant to be repeated. Possibly she knows nothing certain—only what she has been told. You may be right."

"It is all over London," said Carrick. "The symbol on his cards, the ring he wears—that design of two crossed triangles—someone who knows about these things has been identifying it as a very old seal indeed. One of the chaps at my club had it from an Orientalist he knows. Whether this is Mercator spreading his own legend, or whether there is something genuine in it, I cannot tell you. The effect is the same either way: people are inclined to treat him as something more than a gifted outlaw, and that inclination is very much in his interest."

"Perhaps," said Mary. "Though I was at that party, Dick. I saw him with the guests, and I saw the men around the walls. And I thought—it is difficult to say this without sounding simply credulous—I thought that whatever he is, he is not performing. He believes everything he does. That is rather rarer and rather more alarming, I think, than a clever man who has constructed a useful myth for himself."

Carrick was quiet for a moment.

"What a thing it is," he said at last, in a different register—the boyish one he reserved for moments when he was retreating from seriousness—"to possess extraordinary good looks and a talent for the theatrical. One can then be any kind of robber and rest quite confident of the ladies' sympathy."

"Oh, Dick." She was laughing despite herself. "That is thoroughly unfair."

They walked on a little further. Then:

"Heaven knows what actually happened to Krane that night," said Carrick, "to have frightened him into writing that cheque. He is still too raw about it to discuss. I may hear in time."

"My father went to see him."

"At last—yes! I may remind you that Krane once offered me five hundred pounds if I could bring the Marquess to dinner. He came very close to getting what he deserved that day. I think if I had been in uniform I would have handed in my notice rather elegantly."

"These donations—all of them—are the sequel to the card business? The mysterious hand at the table?"

"Certainly. Mercator arranged the whole thing in advance. I described the design on the cards to a man at my club who knows about such things—the interlaced triangles—and he thought it corresponded to a very old seal, though he couldn't be certain from description alone. Whether or not it is what it appears to be, it has done its work. People take Mercator very seriously indeed."

"I must go, Dick. I am dreadfully late for Zoe."

"Let's find you a cab. But it was very good, Mary, to have you to myself for even a little while."

The boyishness had left his voice entirely, and Lady Beatrice knew well enough what occupied his mind. She took his arm and pressed it.

"I don't think anyone was ever in quite such a dreadful position," she said. "To endure it seems impossible. To defy Krane, with your affairs as they are, means—"

"I dare not think what it means," he replied, "when you are with me. But it will all be taken out of my hands eventually. One day I shall tell Cassian Krane precisely what I think of him, and there will be an end of the whole arrangement."

They said nothing more until the taxi arrived. As she got in:

"I understand, Dick," she said quietly. "Nobody else needs to. Try to be diplomatic a little longer."

He held her hand and looked at her, and then, without another word, the cab moved off. He stood watching it until it was absorbed into the traffic, then walked back towards Park Lane.

At the Astoria, Zoe had been patient. When Lady Beatrice finally arrived, her gloominess made itself felt at once: she sat down on the settee, and the troubles she had been carrying alone since leaving Carrick found their proper outlet. She wept.

"Mary, dear." Zoe was beside her immediately, with the particular warmth of a woman who is genuinely good at this. "Tell me everything."

The story came out between sobs: an old enough story, as old stories go, but no less difficult for that. He would have to break from Krane eventually. When he did, there would be very little left. She could not expect him to go on indefinitely.

"He makes so little headway," she said. "And I can see no way out, no way at all."

Zoe's foot tapped a quiet rhythm on the carpet.

"I wonder," she said softly, "whether Cassian Krane will always be there for him to dance attendance upon."

Mary raised her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Has it never struck you that Anton Mercator will not simply stop? He is systematic, Mary. He is working through a list."

"Oh." Mary was quiet. Then: "Though if he went that far, he might do the same with Pa. I cannot quite wish for that, even to help Dick."

"Pa's mean," said Zoe, with the honest detachment of a woman who has thought about this clearly, "but his money is considerably cleaner than Krane's. I keep telling myself that matters."

Mary dried her eyes.

"I hardly know whether to think of Mercator as a friend or an enemy," she said. "He seems to limit himself rather carefully to those who have a great deal and object very strongly to parting with any of it."

"He is a friend," said Zoe, with a quiet certainty that surprised her slightly as she said it. "I believe he wants those people seen differently—not just punished but changed. If they changed, I don't think he would trouble them. You never hear of Mr. Elworth being robbed by him. He contributed voluntarily, and no one has come through his windows."

"He received one of the notices, though."

"He received it and acted on it. That was the point. If Pa would stop spending a fortune on private detectives and simply use his money reasonably, I am quite sure he would not be made to fund things at gunpoint. Certainly not things he considers quite absurd."

"It is rather preposterous," said Mary, with the ghost of a smile. "The idea of compelling Baron Marburg to fund a homelessness programme for Britain."

"Baron Marburg left for Dusseldorf this morning. We shall probably never know under what circumstances he came to write that cheque. Doesn't it seem extraordinary, with all this money being moved around the city, that poor Dick is struggling for want of quite a modest amount?"

"It is dreadful. I see no way out."

"No," said Zoe. "Yet there must be one."

She went to the window and stood looking down at the Strand below, following the movement of the city with eyes that were not, for the moment, seeing it.

What a strange and layered thing moved about her. She could not even map its outline properly. Where was Bingham now? Where was Mercator? Both, as far as she knew, were somewhere in this building—or had been this morning. There was something almost vertiginous in Mercator's composure about this. His disregard for the attempts being made to find him was not bravado; it arose from something she could not name, a settled certainty that the game was not being played on anyone else's terms but his own.

And of the thousands of people she could see from this window—in the street, on the buses, in cars—how many were within the reach of his extraordinary network? It was fascinating and disturbing in almost equal measure, this partial view of a machinery that the rest of the city was only beginning to understand was there.

"Come along, Zoe," said Mary. "We shall be late for lunch."

They took the lift down and went out to where Mr. Hollister's car was waiting. As they pulled into the Strand, Zoe noticed Renwick on the pavement, coming the other way. He raised his hat to them as the car passed. Clearly he was heading for the Astoria.

A few yards behind him, maintaining precisely the interval of a man reading his phone whilst keeping track of something ahead, walked Mr. A. X. Royce.

"I believe he is following Mr. Renwick," Zoe murmured.

She was correct. Mr. Royce had been giving some private thought to the question of how *The Gleaner* was acquiring its exclusive coverage of the Mercator affair. The reporter who was filing the copy was Mr. H. T. Renwick; this much the Pinkerton man had established by the straightforward method of buying a drink for a friendly sub-editor. Renwick seemed to move rather closer to the centre of things than his byline suggested. Mr. Hollister had recommended keeping an eye on Elworth's movements; but Royce, who had a nose for where the actual information was, had decided that Renwick was the more productive thread to pull.

Accordingly, as Renwick walked into the lobby of the Astoria, Mr. Royce was not far behind.

"Has Mr. Storrs of New York arrived?" Renwick asked at the desk.

Yes, Mr. Storrs had arrived and was in room sixty-three.

Renwick seemed to absorb this, glanced around the lobby with the quick, unfocused scan of someone checking whether they are being observed, and then took out his notebook. He wrote something, tore out the page, asked the desk for an envelope, addressed it with the notebook as a writing pad, sealed it carefully, and handed it to a member of staff for delivery. Then, with the studied nonchalance of a man who has not been doing anything interesting at all, he lit a cigarette and strolled out.

He had not cleared the door before Royce was at the desk with an envelope of his own. The staff member was just stepping into the lift; Royce crossed the lobby in four strides and stepped in beside him. He had his own envelope in hand, an initial and "Storrs, Esq." hastily scrawled on it, the flap stuck down. The substitution—executed with the smooth efficiency of someone who has performed similar operations in considerably more challenging circumstances—was completed before the lift reached the fourth floor.

The staff member knocked at room sixty-three, entered, and delivered the message to a tanned, bearded American in shirtsleeves who was working his way through a large rolling suitcase with the purposeful expression of someone who has been

travelling for eighteen hours and is looking for something specific.

"Gentleman couldn't wait, sir," said the staff member.

The American took the envelope, examined the handwriting without recognition, and tore it open.

It was empty.

"What's the game here, son?"

"I saw the gentleman put a note inside, sir."

"You thought you did," said the American, not unkindly. He had perceived at once that the boy was innocent of whatever had occurred. "What did he look like?"

The boy's description was precise enough to be recognised immediately.

"That's Renwick," the American muttered. "Right. I'll ring him at the office and ask what he's playing at. Here, put that in your pocket—you've got a good eye but you'll never be a pickpocket. You didn't watch that envelope half close enough."

Now let us return to Mr. Royce.

Having made his substitution with the ease of a practised conjurer, he withdrew to a quiet corner to examine what he had acquired. He was not overexcited. He had been prompt and he had been competent, but he was a professional, and professionals treat professional successes as part of the ordinary day. His pulse had not quickened. It was simply something he had done correctly.

In a small alcove off the lobby he took out the envelope and opened it, pulling out the scribbled note within. He read as follows:

"MY DEAR STORRS,—Don't forget we're expecting you and your wife at seven. I have nothing further to say, as I am fairly confident an impudent American detective will be reading this before you do.

"RENEWICK."

Mr. Royce replaced the note in the envelope. He moved his cheroot from one side of his mouth to the other, put his hands in his pockets, and walked downstairs at a comfortable pace. He was not offended. Mr. Aloys X. Royce had known for many years, with the equanimity that comes from accepting a fact early in life, that he was not the only clever man in the world.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE LISTENER

Renwick sat with both elbows on his writing table. The hour was well past midnight and the suburban quiet of his street pressed against the windows with a completeness that felt, at this moment, slightly unreliable. Before him lay the late edition of *The Gleaner*, its front page carrying a story he had not written:

SIR LEOPOLD HALFORD AND

MR. HARTMANN FALL INTO LINE

With a discretion born of private intelligence from a source it would not have been wise to name, *The Gleaner* had consistently declined to connect the recent surge of philanthropic activity to anything other than genuine civic feeling. The story of the mysterious cards had leaked, naturally—these things always did—but Renwick had not been its source. The victims' own representatives had frantically sought confirmation from every direction, and found none. This was not an accident.

There had been an informal council at Krane's urgent request: Krane himself, Halford, Elworth, and a few others. The conclusions had been practical ones.

"I will never see that money again," Krane had told them, with the resignation of a man who has arrived at a grief's second stage. "It's as gone as if I'd lit it on fire. My only remaining

asset from the whole catastrophe is a potential title, and I lose that the moment I start complaining publicly. So I do not complain publicly."

"Krane has managed, inadvertently, to become rather popular," Elworth had observed. "That is a form of capital which, I suspect, he has not previously held, and which he is unlikely to encounter again by conventional means. My own contribution, I must repeat for the record, was entirely voluntary. I am simply asking that this be understood."

Halford had pressed for transparency with the authorities and had eventually, and with visible reluctance, been persuaded against it. He had said something uncomplimentary about *The Gleaner* and had been talked down.

Now, Halford and Hartmann had both sent cheques to the paper, and the interviews with the newly philanthropic capitalists were occupying the front page with the kind of coverage that money usually couldn't buy—and, in this case, had not bought in any conventional sense. The Chancellor's letter of commendation ran in every issue. Public subscriptions were following.

Renwick was aware, at times with discomfort, that his position had become a genuinely precarious one. Mr. Hollister's investigators were watching him. Bingham was not idle. And Renwick moved through the middle of this machinery as a man crosses a room in the dark: carefully, with a clear map in his head of where the sharp edges were.

He stood, walked to the fireplace, and knocked out his pipe. Having refilled and lit it, he went softly upstairs and checked the street from a window. It looked empty. It had looked empty a quarter of an hour earlier too, until he had made out a figure standing very still under the trees about a hundred yards up the road.

His visit to the Astoria the previous morning had been calculated: he had expected Royce to intercept the note to Storrs, and had written accordingly. Storrs had confirmed the empty envelope later that morning, which told Renwick what he had already assumed.

Tonight was different. He had received, in the afternoon, a plain card in a familiar small neat hand:

Do not bolt the front door. Expect me at about one o'clock.

There had been a time, not very long ago, when being behind the scenes of this particular drama had been purely exhilarating. It remained exhilarating. But Renwick was honest enough with himself to admit that it was also, increasingly, the kind of exhilaration that comes from standing very close to something that could go very wrong. Anton Mercator was opposed by interests that were not subject to normal financial constraints. Apart from the official service, there were those in the field for whom money in furtherance of their aim was genuinely no object.

That his association with Mercator could end in a police cell was something Renwick had thought about carefully and had not entirely discounted. He thought about it now, listening to the house, and then heard the key turn quietly in the front door lock.

The door opened and gently closed.

Anton Mercator walked into the study.

He was as perfectly turned out as always: dark coat, the long overcoat worn open, carrying nothing tonight. He stood in the doorway where the lamp did not quite reach his face, and in that half-light he had the quality that he seemed always to carry: of being more than the room was entirely prepared for.

"The house is being watched," Renwick began—and stopped.

On the cream of the drawn curtains, a shadow had appeared briefly: the outline of a head, just above the level of the window sill, at the corner where the curtain did not quite close.

"Someone looked in," said Renwick. "There is a gap in that curtain."

"Mr. Aloys X. Royce looked in," said Anton Mercator. His voice carried no particular concern.

"He can call a constable."

"Consider the consequences, Renwick. If he calls the police and they come through that door, to whom does the credit belong?"

"To Royce."

"Wrong. And you know it's wrong. The official service takes every gain. Mr. Royce is many things, but he is not a man who will hand a coup to Scotland Yard. He may attempt to intercept me

when I leave—that is possible. But there will be no urgent knocking on your door by Metropolitan Police officers, I assure you."

Anton Mercator settled into the armchair, lit one of his yellow cigarettes, and stretched his legs with the ease of a man entirely at home.

"The note you played on Royce was irresistible," he said. "But it was indiscreet."

"I know it was."

"After the card affair at the dinner, suspicion was already pointing in your direction. You must not give it unnecessary confirmation."

"I confess the card affair was the most enjoyable moment I have had in a professional capacity in several years," said Renwick. "I leaned over towards Miss Hartmann for the salt or something of that sort, my right hand extended, my left reaching behind her chair. Just far enough."

"Halford was occupied?"

"I waited until he was talking to Lady Marchwood. The table lights were usefully low. I could just reach the cloth, and I deliberately touched Salome's hand as I set the card down beside her."

"She felt your fingers."

"I think so. She turned so quickly that Halford turned as well—just as she was picking up the card. One critical second. But I had already dropped my arm, and it never crossed her mind that the hand she had felt was not that of her neighbour on the

left. Before she could say anything to Halford, I asked to examine the card. It went around the table from there."

"Beautifully done. These small pieces of theatre are worth a great deal to me, Renwick. They generate a particular kind of uncertainty that is more valuable than any number of direct demonstrations." A pause. "Can you picture Cassian Krane sitting rigidly in his dressing room from midnight until five in the morning, too afraid to look around, held in place by the chrome bar of his own suit valet projecting from a wardrobe door?"

"That was the solution of the patriotic mystery."

"Entirely. Stern—who was inside the wardrobe with the written instructions and the authority they implied—made his exit the moment Krane's cheque was in his hand. He left the bar in place, closed the wardrobe door to the appropriate gap, and came out through the bedroom window. The bar mounted guard for the rest of the night while you placed the announcement and arranged the Chancellor's visit."

Renwick had been listening with professional attention, but at the name Stern his attention shifted quality entirely.

"Stern," he said. "Krane's own chief of staff."

"Yes." Anton Mercator's expression was, for a moment, something between amusement and a deeper satisfaction. "Stern has been with me for rather longer than he has been with Mr. Krane. He is one of the most capable people I know."

Renwick was quiet for a moment, recalibrating certain memories: Stern arriving first at the dressing room and finding no cards on the table; Stern in the library during the Marburg

incident, emerging precisely when needed; the pale, composed face that had given nothing away across a hundred conversations.

"He must have been very useful," he said at last.

"Indispensable," said Mercator simply. "He has access to everything in that household. And he is a man of exceptional steadiness."

Renwick relighted his pipe and looked at his visitor.

Here was the man who had remade the social arithmetic of Mayfair in a matter of weeks. Who held private keys to the national collection. Who moved in and out of watched houses at one in the morning and sat in armchairs in the suburban dark with the composure of a man who has nowhere urgent to be. Whose network reached into drawing rooms, households, hotel lobbies, the financial press—and apparently the inner offices of the very billionaires he was methodically relieving of their surplus wealth. This was the man whom the Metropolitan Police could not locate, whom a Pinkerton operative with unlimited resources was failing to corner, whose associates numbered in the hundreds and had not produced a single informant. This was Anton Mercator.

It was, sitting across a writing table from him at one in the morning, genuinely difficult to make the thing feel real.

"Yet I am he," said the melodious voice.

Renwick started as though something had touched him.

"Was I thinking aloud?"

"In a sense. Your attention was so concentrated that your face was reading rather clearly. Your pipe had also gone out."

Renwick laughed quietly and attended to the pipe. Mercator's occasional habit of responding to unspoken thoughts was something he had not yet fully adapted to, and suspected he never entirely would.

"Mr. Hartmann is now among my friends," Mercator continued, glancing towards Renwick's paper. "The paragraph appears in your late edition. Good."

"And Halford?"

"Sir Leopold will not be among my friends, nor do I seek it. There is a matter in his history—you are aware of the general outline—which I do not raise against him in any moral sense. Had he held his hand more loosely, it should never have been recalled to his attention. It served as a lever. A poor one, I acknowledge. I would prefer not to cast stones. But it served."

He looked at the window. Then, with a quick movement, he took a sheet of paper from the writing table and wrote rapidly:

He has a directional listening device attached to the lower pane. He can likely follow this conversation. He may try to hold me when I leave, but he cannot enter without committing an offence himself. You have a back gate. If you will allow me to pass through the kitchen and garden, I will leave by that way. Continue talking for some minutes after I go. There is nothing here to connect me. Royce can prove nothing.

He replaced the pen on the tray and continued, in his normal register, as though the note had not happened:

"I want you to join me for supper on Wednesday evening. A number of people I regard as friends will be there, and I should value your presence very much."

Renwick was attempting, by facial expression and careful eye movement, to indicate the window. Mercator ignored this entirely.

"I have taken a house for a time at Richmond. It is called The Beeches, and it overlooks the Thames. The grounds run to two quiet roads on either side and the situation is ideal for my purposes. I will send you the full particulars"—a brief glance towards the window—"in writing. We meet there on Wednesday at nine-thirty. May I count on you?"

"Yes," said Renwick, "unless something prevents me at the last moment. I may have to wire."

"You are nervous," said Anton Mercator, and smiled; and slipped from the room.

"Not at all," said Renwick, addressing the window with the measured tone of a man continuing a natural conversation. "There is nothing I find more agreeable than an evening in an atmospheric house by the river."

He continued in this vein for several minutes, working in a reference to a Professor, a Wednesday appointment, and the Society for Psychical Research, before reflecting that Royce was probably too professional to be entirely taken in by this kind of thing. He was nevertheless making it as difficult as possible.

Outside, Mr. Aloys X. Royce lay flat on the lawn with a directional microphone pressed against the lower corner of the window glass and his ear against the receiver. He had been there for some time.

He had conceived, and confirmed over five nights of patient observation, the theory that Renwick held private meetings with Anton Mercator at his home, after midnight, when the rest of the household was in bed. On the previous four nights, Renwick's light had gone out before midnight. Tonight it had remained burning, and his vigilance had been rewarded: a car had stopped some distance away, its occupant had walked to the house and been admitted with remarkable speed.

For a while he had struggled to resolve the voices through the glass, until his ear and the instrument between them found their alignment. By then, he had missed the opening of the conversation and had been working from context. There had been passages that seemed clearly to confirm his theory—names he recognised, references that fitted—and then the conversation had moved in a direction he found harder to follow. The visitor had gone quiet. Renwick was speaking, but to a different effect than before. His remarks seemed to bear on what had preceded them only loosely. The connection was forced.

A light of interpretation arrived.

He detached the instrument from the glass, crossed the lawn in a low, rapid crouch, and went out through the front gate at speed. Then he ran.

Around to the rear of the house, into the narrow lane behind it. He knew the property. He knew the back gate was kept bolted at night.

The back gate was not bolted.

He tilted his hat back and looked at it.

Then, from somewhere down the road on the far side of the house, came the sound of a whistle: that distinctive minor note, eerie and unhurried, that he had now heard described in three separate witness reports.

Royce ran. He rounded the corner as a car pulled away from the kerb two hundred yards further along and swung around the next turning at a speed that suggested the driver had been ready for exactly this.

It was gone.

Mr. Royce extracted a cheroot from his case, lit it with deliberate care, and stood for a moment on the pavement. Then he began to walk back towards the hotel, at a comfortable pace, smoking thoughtfully.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ZOE DREAMS

If you know the Astoria, you will recall that tucked around the quieter side of the building—away from the main dining room, away from the lobby with its perpetual theatre of arrivals and departures—there are a number of small, semi-private alcoves. In each of them a single good lamp, and a window that opens nearly to the floor onto the lights of the city below. The lamp has a switch at the chair, so that when you prefer the darkness that assists reflection, it is easily at your command.

To one of these alcoves Zoe Hollister retired after a dinner she had not particularly enjoyed, eaten alone at a corner table in the main dining room. Her father had been called away by some piece of business too late in the evening for her to make other arrangements. She had dined in solitary elegance, nodded to several acquaintances without encouraging any of them, and had then retreated to the alcove with an iced drink and a cigarette.

She had half-expected, in some way she could not quite justify to herself, that Anton Mercator would be somewhere in the hotel. He was not, or at any rate was not visible. The thought of telephoning Mary Ashford had occurred to her; then she remembered that Mary was at some function at her uncle's. Sheila Marchwood was probably at home, but the evening had settled on Zoe in a way that made even so short a drive seem more trouble than it was worth.

She curled up in the big cane chair with its cushions, switched off the lamp, and looked out at London from the dark.

Her reflections, naturally, turned on Anton Mercator. She tried to examine, honestly, why she admired a man whom the law was actively hunting. She could not quite face the full shape of the answer, but she felt a warmth in her face that suggested she knew what it was. She was a traitor to her father; she acknowledged this clearly. But she had been a frank traitor, which she considered to be the only tolerable kind.

Only that morning she had said as much to Hollister directly.

"Anton Mercator," she had told him, "only makes you rich men do what you ought to do with some of your money. Even if the cause weren't a good one—even if it were a completely ridiculous one, like making Canadians and Americans fund a British homelessness programme—at least it makes you *spend* something. Which is more than the rest of the world has managed."

Her father had received this with his usual dry patience.

"I guess you'd stand right up for the Mercator man, then," he had said. "If it ever came to the point."

"Sure," Zoe had said. "You spend a fortune on detectives and not enough on people who actually need things."

"You ought to write for *The Gleaner*, Zoe. They'd love you. They're popular at the moment, too. Raising all the right friends in all the right places."

"Why don't you start a fund for retraining the Nexcore workers?" she had pressed. "You've made a lot of money out of

Canada. Then maybe nobody would need to compel you to do anything."

"I don't need *anybody* to compel me to do anything! That man will not get me held up without earning every dollar of it. Zoe, you are a thoroughly unnatural daughter."

The memory of it made her smile in the dark. It was genuinely incomprehensible to her that a man of her father's resources should guard his expenditure with the white-knuckled grip of someone who has three weeks until payday. The gold fever was a disease she had never contracted, and it made her father, whom she loved, genuinely mysterious to her.

Musing on these things, she slept.

And dreamed.

She dreamed of stone. A city of stone and heat and old dust, somewhere very far from the present century. There were people in the streets, garbed in ways she recognised from paintings in museums she had visited as a child; moving with the particular purposefulness of a crowd at a festival. Music came from somewhere: not quite any music she had heard, with instruments she could not name, and a rhythm that seemed to belong to a different idea of time than the one she lived in.

A procession moved through the stone gates of the city into the desert beyond: figures in white, and older figures in darker robes, and girls whose hair was dressed with flowers. They were received by what seemed to be soldiers. Then the procession turned, and came back in, and at the centre of it was a man in armour of beaten gold who descended from a chariot as it drew

level with where Zoe stood. He stooped, took a flower from among the dozens heaped in the chariot's floor, and held it out to her. His eyes met hers.

And she knew them.

She dreamed on: she was inside now, in a large dim space, stone-floored, pillared. The lily he had given her lay beside her where she rested. Two men were talking on the other side of a pillar, their voices low. She could hear them, though she could not see them.

"It overlooks the river," said one. "Two sides of the garden are on roads as quiet as you could want. There's a narrow lane round the back that runs the full length. We'll want six or eight men, plus us."

"What's wrong," said the other voice, which seemed oddly familiar, "with getting Scotland Yard in?"

A pause.

"I didn't want to call them in. I'm after the credit."

"I'm after the business," came the drawling answer.

"Mostly."

The dream-pillar seemed to thin to a veil between sleep and waking. She did not know, in her curious half-state, that this was the boundary.

"Baxter can come with us. The other two boys can stay on Elworth and Renwick—we can't neglect the rest of the programme because this one's the headline. I rang Hagan and he said he could give me six sharp people for Wednesday evening."

"More expense. Why go to a private agency at all when there's a whole official police force whose job it is?"

"Because there'll be people there with big names. If we're running it, we control what gets disclosed. If Scotland Yard had it, there'd be a scandal from here to Westminster."

"You're thinking about the credit. I know you. This man's going to cost me a fortune anyway. What do you actually know about the house?"

"It's called The Beeches. It fronts on the road by the towing-path. It was leased about three weeks ago to a Dr. Ignatius Carwell, who's represented as some kind of private neurologist. I've been over every yard of the ground. Here's the plan: two men go in at dusk and get into position in the lane behind the garden; ten minutes later, two more take the west side and two more the towing-path. There's a stand of trees directly opposite the front gate. You and I and Baxter use those. We watch who goes in. There's a short crescent drive, low hedge—good visibility. When everybody's arrived, we walk up to the door. The moment it opens, we go in all together. The house will be covered on every side."

"Sounds risky."

"Not with enough people. He's got a substantial crowd of associates."

"Make it seven, then. Or eight. Go on."

"I'd still prefer Scotland Yard."

"They've made a mess of everything so far. No. Hang the cost. I'll handle this myself."

"Then we'll need more men than I budgeted. Shall we ring Hagan again now?"

Zoe was wide awake. She heard a door close. She sat up.

The alcove was dark and smelled of cheroot smoke. Her father and Royce had come into this small, unlighted recess for a private conversation, found it apparently empty, and talked freely in the dark. Curled in the deep chair among its cushions, she had not been visible, and since the room had been dark when they entered, her presence had not been considered.

She sat very still and understood what she had heard.

Wednesday evening. The Beeches. Tomorrow evening.

He had to be warned. It was not possible to think of it otherwise. She could not face the idea of his being taken like a common felon, of watching the composure in those dark, luminous eyes replaced by something she would not be able to bear.

But how to reach him? She was being watched—or if she was not being watched at this hour, she could not be certain she was not. The hotel's car service would create a record. Her usual driver would remember. She would need to walk clear of the hotel first, pick up a cab somewhere else, somewhere the connection could not easily be traced back.

Linden Cottage, Dulwich Village. That was what he had told her.

She went to her room, changed out of her dinner things into a dark jacket and trousers, and put on a hat that the masculine sensibility would price at almost nothing but which had in fact cost considerably more than a man's suit. She did not trouble her

maid. Then she went down by the stairs rather than the lift, and slipped out of the hotel into the courtyard.

"Taxi, madam?"

She checked herself.

"No thank you," she said. "I think I'll walk for a bit."

She crossed the courtyard and joined the stream of pedestrians. She had almost made the most elementary possible error: a hotel taxi, booked from the door, would be traceable in ten minutes. She walked without stopping, crossed the Strand, and went into the concourse of Charing Cross Station, which was still busy at that hour. She found a cab rank and approached the first driver.

"Dulwich Village, please."

The man made a face. Dulwich was well south of the river, and at this hour there was no certainty of a return fare.

"Bit far, miss. Late to be going south."

"I'll need you to bring me back as well."

The American accent, which had become more audible, produced its effect.

"Right you are, miss. Hop in."

Zoe settled in the back and watched London move past the window as they crossed the bridge and the city changed character on the south bank: larger, quieter, the commercial energy of the centre giving way to the longer, lower residential streets of inner south London, and then to something quieter still.

She had time to think on the way, and she thought carefully. How little, in practical terms, she actually knew about Anton

Mercator. She was a shrewd American girl under the romanticism, and she was aware of this: she had met a very compelling person, had been told a very compelling story, and had allowed herself to become, in some degree she had not precisely measured, his ally. Were these sufficient grounds for a clandestine trip to a cottage in south London at eleven o'clock on a Tuesday night?

She decided that they were. He had offered her a way out at any time. She had not taken it. If she had not taken it then, she could not take it now, when taking it would hurt him most.

"Dulwich Village, miss. Which house was it?"

"Linden Cottage."

The driver scratched his head.

"Some of these older places don't come up on the map," he said. "I'm not certain where that one is."

A police officer stood at the corner. The driver pulled over and enquired. He came back: Linden Cottage was round behind the college buildings.

The cab went on. The streets here were narrower and quieter than Zoe had expected to find within Greater London. The sodium lights thinned, the houses set further back behind their hedges and trees. It was surprisingly remote-feeling for a place she had reached in twenty minutes from the Strand.

"Road gets rough here, miss," said the driver. "I'm not sure I can go much further."

She got out. The lane surface was uneven, unpaved at the verge.

"Is it much further?"

"That'll be the place, I think. The one set back in the trees, on the left. About a hundred yards."

"Wait here please."

She walked ahead alone. The night was fine and still, and dark without being hostile—the particular darkness of a neighbourhood that goes to bed early and does not feel the need to illuminate itself elaborately. On either side of the lane, trees and hedges and the occasional blank flank of a garden wall. Ahead, a clump of larger trees, and within them, set back on a slight rise, a substantial house.

No light showed anywhere in it.

Zoe came level with a small iron gate. She paused. There was a name on the top bar—worn, weathered. She took out her phone for the torch and bent to read it.

LINDEN COTTAGE

She was in the right place. She opened the gate, went along the narrow path through the overgrown bushes, and came to the door of the cottage.

The cottage was small and low, and appeared entirely dark. It had the particular silence of somewhere that has not been occupied recently. She found no bell, but there was an old iron knocker on the door.

She knocked.

The sound went through the cottage and came back at her. It was the sound of empty rooms.

No answer. No light. No movement.

She knocked a second time, and a third, and stood listening. From somewhere deep in the trees behind the cottage came the sound of something small moving in the undergrowth. The lane beyond the gate was utterly still. She was quite alone.

The silence pressed around her with the particular patience of something that has been there for a long time and does not intend to shift.

Zoe turned, walked back along the path, and went out through the gate onto the lane.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AT "THE BEECHES"

Zoe could not persuade herself that this dark and silent cottage was genuinely the address Anton Mercator had given her. Yet the name on the gate was unambiguous. She had read it with her own phone torch.

The thought of writing a note and slipping it under the door came to her. She hesitated. A note left here might be found by the wrong person as easily as the right one. But what else was there? She had no means of reaching him directly. The note would have to do.

She walked back to the cab.

"Couldn't find anyone at home, miss?"

"There's no one there. I need to write a note and have it put under the door. It's rather lonely down that path—would you be willing to slip it through for me? I can mind the cab."

The driver smiled and agreed without hesitation. He was a practical man who knew a good fare when he had one.

"Paper and a pencil?"

He tore a sheet from a notepad and gave her a biro. Using the notebook as a writing surface in the near-side light, she wrote:

"Your meeting at The Beeches is known to Mr. Royce. Do not go."

"It's such a small piece of paper," she said. "They might not see it."

"I'll fold it and push it well under, miss. Don't worry."

He went off, and came back within two minutes.

"Charing Cross Station, please."

She settled back and looked out at the London night as the cab retraced its route northward. She had done what she could. Whether it would be enough depended on whether the cottage was genuinely unoccupied or simply kept dark—and on whether the note would be found at all.

The driver received his fare at Charing Cross and something considerably beyond it, and went home satisfied.

In the foyer of the Astoria, Lady Beatrice Ashford was waiting with Mrs. Wellington Trentham in attendance. Mary was not in her usual composed state. She was bright-eyed and barely managing to stand still.

"Where on earth have you been?" she cried, springing forward.

"Cinema," said Zoe, with complete composure, her eyes moving briefly to Mrs. Trentham.

"I could not possibly wait until morning," Mary said. "I ran straight here from an absolutely dreadful function at my uncle's. Zoe—Dick has come into some money."

"What?"

"A legacy. A remote aunt—he had no idea she knew he existed. She's left him five thousand pounds."

J. J. Hollister's daughter, who was a genuine friend to the core, did not smile. She understood, to the penny, what five thousand pounds meant to these two people: not five times what it meant to her, but five hundred times. It was the difference between Carrick continuing to endure his arrangement with Krane and ending it. It was the difference between a man who had compromised himself almost beyond bearing, and one who had not. It was, in short, the difference between things continuing as they were and things changing.

"Mary," she said, and pressed both her friend's hands, and her eyes were bright. "That is so very, very good. Come upstairs and tell me everything."

In Zoe's room the story was told: not romantic in its particulars, but with everything in its potential sequel that anyone could wish. A distant relation whose existence Carrick had barely registered; a solicitor's letter arriving that evening; an amount that would, with careful management, carry him clear.

Mr. Hollister came in towards the end of the telling. He offered dry congratulations in his sandy voice, and a piece of financial advice.

"He should put it to work immediately. Money lying in a current account is charity to the banking sector."

"He hasn't actually received it yet," Mary explained. "Only the solicitor's letter. He says he will not quite believe it until the funds are in his account."

"Understandable," said Hollister. "Ring me when he's ready to talk about options."

Zoe was watching her father as he spoke, with the attention she had been giving his manner all evening. He was suppressing something. The characteristic compression of his face was more compressed than usual, the sandy voice a shade more controlled.

When Mary had gone, however, he said nothing of the matter that was occupying him, and Zoe felt too guilty to raise it. They went to bed without having mentioned Anton Mercator by name.

Zoe could not sleep. She lay reading until well past one o'clock. When the book dropped from her hands she slept, and did not dream.

In the morning she checked her messages with an attention that had nothing casual about it. There was nothing.

Had her note been found? Or had Mercator moved on for some other reason, and would he arrive at The Beeches tonight without any warning of what was waiting for him?

Her father's manner at breakfast was eloquent. He ate very little, left her at the table with a brief apology, and went off with Royce.

She wished very much that she had someone she could talk to about this. She spent the morning in a state of distraction that made everything she attempted pointless. She went to be fitted for something at a dressmaker's and lasted eleven minutes before asking them to come to the hotel the following day instead. She went to see Sheila Marchwood in the afternoon and found that everyone in that household, including the household itself, irritated her beyond bearing. She left with a headache.

As dusk fell, her condition became genuinely difficult. She sat at the window and watched the Embankment lights come on, point after point, in the thickening dark.

Elsewhere, at that same hour, Mr. J. J. Hollister was walking up Richmond Hill beside Mr. Royce. Both men wore dark outdoor coats. Hollister's cap was pulled forward against the breeze coming off the river.

"By the time we reach position it will be dark enough for our purpose," said Royce, moving his cheroot from one side of his mouth to the other. "It's a dry night, which is the main thing. I've picked out a gap in the railings opposite the gate where we can see the drive and the front of the house clearly."

"You can count on Hagan's people?"

"I went over the ground plan with eight of them at his office this afternoon. They know exactly where they're posting and what the signal is. A cat won't leave The Beeches without being noted. Not through any door."

"And when we walk up to the front?"

"The moment the door opens I hold it," said Royce. "Five of Hagan's men go in with Baxter and yourself. Two men covering each remaining exit point, with instructions to hold and whistle if needed."

"Sounds workable. This hill goes on considerably longer than any hill has a right to."

"The milestone up there on the right. First gate is fifty yards past it."

"The crowd arrived?"

"Most of them. They're going in singly and in pairs. There should be four on the river side by now and Baxter somewhere around the front."

They walked on without speaking. Level with the milestone, but not stopping, Royce gave a low whistle. From somewhere among the trees on the left came a reply.

"Baxter," said Royce. "Through this gap in the railings."

Mr. Hollister negotiated the gap with the focused dignity of a man who has decided that undignified things are sometimes necessary.

"The open railings further along are where we watch from," said Royce from the darkness beside him. "Dense shrubs for cover. We'll have clear sight of everyone who comes up the drive."

"You're certain it's tonight."

"Certain," said Royce, patiently.

"Because," said Hollister, feeling his way through the undergrowth, "this is not a natural situation for me."

"Sss!"

Mr. Hollister froze.

"That you, Baxter?" from Royce.

"Yes. Nobody's gone in yet. But there's a ground floor room lit up, and the conservatory."

"Right."

A brief gleam: Royce checking his watch.

"Time everyone was in position. Baxter—do the rounds. Quick."

Baxter dissolved into the undergrowth. Hollister and Royce settled into their spot, which gave them a direct view across the road to the gate of The Beeches and the house beyond. Most of the windows were lit.

"The grounds go down to the towpath?" asked Hollister.

"Yes. Four men down there."

Silence. The breeze from the river moved through the trees above them with the particular sound of water heard in the wrong place. From somewhere in the direction of Richmond, carried on the air, came the thin sound of a bicycle or motorbike—and then it grew more distinct, and it was approaching.

"Back in a moment," said Royce quietly, and without waiting for a response, was gone.

Hollister watched from his position as Royce crossed the road at a walk—quite openly, unhurried, the walk of a man returning to a house he lives in—and went through the gate of The Beeches. He disappeared.

Down the hill, the cyclist slowed. It was a cycle courier, the company logo on a reflective bag. He dismounted before the gate.

At that moment Royce reappeared, strolling out through the gate, pulling on a pair of gloves.

"Delivery for Dr. Carwell?" he said pleasantly.

The courier checked his screen.

"Carwell, yes. This the right address?"

"It is," said Royce. "I've been expecting something all evening."

He signed, took the envelope, and walked to the nearest streetlamp with the easy confidence of a man who has received a delivery at his own address. He opened it there, read what was inside, and tossed the courier a coin.

"No reply," he said.

He stood a moment, apparently considering something, scratched his chin, and walked back in through the gate. The courier mounted his bicycle and rode away downhill.

The moment the cyclist was gone, Royce slipped through the gate, moved quickly across the road, and came back through the gap in the railings.

"From Renwick," he said. "Mercator must have sent him written particulars as arranged. The note just says: 'Detained. S.' Posted from *The Gleaner* offices." He paused. "Renwick either got cold feet, or he was followed and decided he couldn't risk it."

"He's smart, Renwick," said Hollister. "He may have worked out that we were onto the thing. Or maybe he got warned."

"Sss!"

"That you, Baxter?" from Royce.

"All posted. Nobody can move in or out without being seen."

"Good. The journalist isn't coming. Did you clock my collection of the delivery?"

"Clean. I wonder if the other guests will still turn up."

"We wait," said Royce. "I want to see who goes in before we move. If we knock on that door now we've got a leased house and a neurologist who's done nothing publicly wrong. We need guests."

"Quiet."

The footsteps of a police constable on his beat came and passed without incident. When they had gone:

"If he knew who'd leased The Beeches," murmured Royce, "he'd be a sergeant inside six months."

The road before The Beeches was exactly as Royce had described it: a quiet stretch of river road with almost no foot traffic at this hour. A laggard moon emerged from behind cloud and lit the tarmac white as far as the eye could follow. A breeze moved off the Thames, and with it came the faint creak of oars from the water below—a voice, dimly, rising and falling on the air.

Then came the car.

Its headlights announced it from some distance, and it arrived quickly: a large, dark saloon that swung smoothly into the crescent drive without slowing. Its plate showed briefly in the lamplight.

"That's Elworth's car," said Baxter from the shadows. "I pulled the registered keeper this afternoon. Private plate."

"Well," said Hollister, and there was something in the sandy voice that was not entirely composed. "This is getting altogether too exciting. Antony Elworth. No wonder Mercator was so hard to corner. Do you see the class of people he's got with him."

The car sat before the door of the house for some minutes, then was driven around and out through the far gate of the drive. Its lights swept the road as it turned, and then it was gone, back in the direction from which it had come.

"I'm glad we left Scotland Yard out of this and yet sorry," said Hollister. "This is a full conspiracy, start to finish. Think of Elworth." He was quiet a moment. "There's going to be a scene."

"For the moment, we hold position," said Royce. "There may be more arrivals."

A silence. The breeze came again off the river.

From downhill, the sound of another engine.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN
THE LAMP AND THE MASK

"I wonder whose car that is," said Royce.

None of the three had any idea. But its occupants, whoever they were, performed exactly the same manoeuvre as the first car, and within moments of its arrival it was gone again, back down the hill.

Seconds later, the sound of a third engine. A third car came fast up the hill, swung into the drive, and departed by the far gate as its predecessors had done.

"Three," said Royce. His tone had acquired a thoughtful quality.

"I think we should move," said Hollister. "Every car that goes in and out makes it less likely that the door will open to us at all."

"That's what I was thinking," said Baxter. "They may all be arrived. We lose nothing by waiting a little longer, but we lose a great deal if we wait too long."

"Come on," said Hollister. His voice had an energy in it that had not been there earlier in the evening.

Thud-thud-thud.

"Another one!" said Royce. "Move now—this way, Mr. Hollister. Mind the broken rail. We need to be on the steps as the car comes around the drive."

They came through the gap and ran across the road, Hollister keeping up with the others easily. Below them, headlights were

already cutting through the tree line as a large car took the bend fast.

"Just in time!"

They went through the gate and up the drive. Behind them the car was already turning. As it swung along the crescent and its lights swept the steps, Royce took the four stone steps at a run and jabbed the bell with his thumb.

At the same moment, Baxter gave three sharp whistles.

Events then moved at a speed that made the previous hour of stillness feel like a different country.

Several people climbed out of the car. From the darkness around the house came the sound of running feet, converging.

The door was thrown open. A blaze of light swept the steps.

Royce leapt over the threshold, his arm extended, and shouted:

"Follow me, boys!"

The surge that came up the steps swept Hollister and Baxter with it. They were propelled through the door and into the house before they had fully registered that the men rushing in from every direction were not the people they had expected.

"Let go of me, you damned idiot!" came Royce's voice, sharp and furious, from somewhere ahead in the darkness.

The lights went out. The door slammed.

"Royce!" Hollister shouted. "Royce!"

Someone pinned his arms from behind. He struggled, entirely without result.

"I am not one of them!" he shouted. "I am not one of—"

A hand was placed firmly across his mouth. With his eyes wide and his fists clenched in a fury that had nowhere to go, Hollister was moved forward through the darkness: along a corridor, up a flight of stairs, the sounds of other people around him, the whole operation carried out with a quiet competence that somehow made it worse. Then fewer people around him, and then a door closing, and silence.

Distantly, briefly, the sound of Royce's voice raised in anger. Then nothing.

Hollister stood very still.

He turned with care and felt for the door he knew was just behind him. He found the handle, turned it. As he had expected: locked. He wondered about the dimensions of the room he was in. He pressed himself against the wall, moved slowly along it, step by careful step, one hand trailing the plaster. The tenth step brought him to a corner. He turned and continued: shuttered windows, closely barred. Another corner. Another wall. A fourth corner, and the door handle again.

A square room, apparently. Empty. But what might there be in the middle of the floor? He had heard the Thames at the bottom of the garden. He pressed his back against the door and stood there, controlling his breathing.

Something was in the room with him.

He could not have explained this certainty. It was not a sound or a movement. It was simply the particular quality of a silence that is not empty.

He stared into the darkness until his eyes ached.

A glow began. Very dim at first, a faint warmth of light in the centre of the room: growing, slowly, with the particular quality of an old-fashioned lamp brought up to strength rather than a switch thrown. It illuminated a face, and nothing else, at first: a dark face with large eyes that gleamed through a black silk half-mask.

Then the lamp reached its full output, and Hollister saw the room entire. A small Edison-style globe in an iron holder on a plain deal table. A chair. Nothing else at all. The man at the table wore evening dress, was very dark, appeared—in the face that was visible around the mask—to be exceptionally handsome. But it was the eyes that held Hollister. He could not look away from them.

He knew who sat opposite him.

Anton Mercator pushed something across the table.

"Your cheque book," he said, "and a pen."

Hollister gulped. He did not move.

Mercator's voice had a quality of familiarity he could not immediately account for.

"You are the secondrichest man in the United States," Mercator continued, "and the first in parsimony. I intend to relieve you of one hundred thousand pounds."

"You'll never get it," said Hollister.

"Let us consider the alternatives. Your donation, and those already received, are designated for the construction of the first three permanent overnight shelters in the rough-sleeping programme. They will carry the names of their principal donors.

The Krane Centre, The Marburg Building, and—should you cooperate this evening—The Hollister House. You will have funded a facility that will exist, with your name on it, in central London for the foreseeable future.”

“I don’t want a shelter with my name on it,” said Hollister.

“You will want it considerably more than you want the alternative. Which is: I arrange for certain well-documented details of your Canadian operations—the Nexcore restructuring, specifically, and two similar situations preceding it, which I have in full—to be placed before every relevant regulatory body simultaneously, together with a detailed account of how the information came to light. These are not matters of opinion, Mr. Hollister. They are documented. They will not reflect well on you.”

“Ah,” said Hollister.

There was a quality in this that his commercial instincts recognised. The specific, the quantified, the documented. This was not theatre.

“Furthermore,” Mercator continued, “should you attempt to recover your donation by disclosing the circumstances under which it was made, your residence in New York will be burned—without loss of life, the removal of staff being arranged in advance, but with destruction of property considerably exceeding in value the amount of your contribution. I regret this bluntness. But you are a man who responds to clear terms.”

“Yep,” said Hollister, with the brevity of a man who is thinking hard.

"You may wonder why I have gone to the considerable trouble of bringing you here, when a simple letter threatening to expose the Nexcore documentation might have achieved the same result without all this inconvenience. The answer is this: you are a man of a particular type. Written threats are insufficient for your type. You require a direct encounter with the reality of the situation before you will believe in it. You will believe in it now."

"I believe in it," said Hollister, dryly.

"Good. There is also a printed letter here, which I ask you to sign. It is addressed to *The Gleaner*, and it conveys your view that businesses which have extracted substantial profits from communities have an obligation to invest proportionately in the welfare of those communities. It makes specific reference to the Canadian workforce and proposes that the new shelter bear the name 'The Hollister House.' It is entirely in your own interest—commercially, reputationally—and it is, I would note, true."

"You want me to sign a letter saying something I don't believe."

"I want you to sign a letter saying something you will believe, once you have had the opportunity to examine your position without the distortions imposed by habit and proximity. You may dispute that now. You will not dispute it in six months."

Hollister was quiet for a moment. His eyes moved around the bare room and came back to the masked face and the steady gaze behind it.

"You're aware," he said, "that the men Mr. Baxter sent up from Hagan's Agency are posted all around this house."

"The men surrounding this house," said Mercator, "are friends of mine. Mr. Hagan's people were contacted this afternoon and informed that the operation had been cancelled. They are at home. The cars you observed were my own, circling between here and Richmond Bridge, with the plates altered on each pass. I am afraid the trap was sprung rather earlier in the evening than you realise."

"Real cute," said Hollister, and meant it despite himself.

"The Beeches has also been registered as a private wellness and recovery residence. Any noise from within it will be interpreted accordingly by anyone who hears it. You are quite secure from accidental rescue."

A silence.

"My car is outside," said Mercator. "Should you prefer to continue this conversation elsewhere, that is possible. You will not be held here indefinitely."

"You can't hold me at all, in the end," said Hollister. "The moment I'm out, I can make this public and demand my money back."

"On the day that you do," replied Mercator, with an evenness that was somehow more convincing than a threat, "the documentation goes to every regulatory body I mentioned. The two outcomes are not equivalent, Mr. Hollister. One of them costs you a hundred thousand pounds and a building with your name on it. The other costs you considerably more."

Hollister said nothing for a long moment.

"Why do you do this?" he said at last. "Why not simply expose me and be done with it?"

"Because exposure is not my purpose. Your money going to people who have no money is my purpose. What you did to the Nexcore workforce was specific and documented and harmful to three thousand people who had no recourse. I intend you to provide some of that recourse. You will remain my guest until you have given me your cheque and your signature to the letter. After that—" he paused—"I think, in time, we may understand each other better."

Hollister looked at the cheque book on the table.

"The future," said Anton Mercator, "is entirely in your own hands."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN
THE DAMASCUS CURTAIN

The fund was drawing extraordinary public support. Following the headline donations from the major subscribers, smaller contributions had been coming in from across the country with a generosity that surprised even *The Gleaner*, which had not expected its appeal to produce anything like this velocity of response. Something in the combination of the named donors—the visibility of people not known for their charitable impulse suddenly appearing on a public subscription list—had loosened pockets that ordinarily required considerable persuasion.

The fund's progress was the story of the week, and the story of the week was Anton Mercator.

One morning, at the height of the enthusiasm, Mr. Hollister rose from the breakfast table upon hearing his phone.

"Zoe," he said, "if that's a journalist, I'm unwell and expect to remain so."

He shuffled out. Since the night of the abortive operation at The Beeches he had shown a consistent preference for not speaking to the press. The details of his time at Richmond he had vouchsafed to no one, and the story had been effectively suppressed, as effectively as a sufficiently substantial bank balance can suppress such things. Zoe, nevertheless, knew the truth.

Renwick was shown in.

"Sorry to burst in," he said briskly, "but I wanted to ask Mr. Hollister if there is anything in this piece he would like changed before it runs." He held out a proof. "It's for a business magazine profile. They're doing a series on the major donors to the fund—calling them the Emergency Housing Philanthropists, which is possibly the most ungainly phrase in the English language, but there it is."

"Can you leave it?" said Zoe. "He's dressing and currently not in the best of humours."

"Happily," said Renwick, and set the proof on the table. "Ring me if anything needs changing. Goodbye."

Zoe was reading it when her father returned.

"Press been here?" he said. "Thought so. What a thoroughly blameless martyr I am."

"Look at this," said Zoe. "There's a long profile of you. And there's a quote—it says you told them: 'Global businesses that generate profits from communities have an unconditional responsibility to invest proportionately in the welfare of those communities. This fund represents a small step towards that obligation.' Is that all right?"

Mr. Hollister was quiet for a moment.

"Have Krane and Halford seen this article?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Because," said Hollister, "they've been profiled in exactly this way, same as me. If their dignity can survive it, I reckon mine's constructed along similar lines."

He poured himself more coffee with the particular composure of a man who has decided that some things are simply the price of doing business.

It was whilst Hollister was thus expressing his stoicism that Renwick, having left the proof at the Astoria, raced back to his club for an appointment. His man had not arrived. He came out again and walked down towards Fleet Street.

Mr. Aloys X. Royce, in his characteristic broad-brimmed Stetson and a tweed suit of transatlantic dimensions, concluded what had detained him in a nearby pub and drifted in the same direction.

A taxi offered its services to Renwick at the corner. He hesitated, then shook his head, and, on sudden impulse, stepped out into the traffic and swung himself onto a westbound bus. Pausing mid-action with his cigar half-lit, Royce hailed the taxi with crisp instructions, and the Stetson disappeared into its interior to proceed in the bus's wake.

The price of having become the most informed journalist in London on the subject of Anton Mercator was this: constant, professional, occasionally imaginative surveillance. What Renwick had gleaned from his access had allowed him to invest his copy with a quality of certainty—a sense of writing from the inside—that had made his work the most-read coverage in the country. As a less convenient consequence, his movements were now tracked with a persistence that any private person would have found intolerable.

He took an outside seat on the bus and watched the Strand move past him, placards all the way:

M. BERTHIER IN LONDON.

That was an exclusive *Gleaner* item, delivered to Renwick on the familiar small card. M. Berthier, of the Paris police, was at the Hotel Astoria—in connection with the Mercator case.

But this was not the item most currently occupying Renwick's mind. In his inside pocket was another card, differing from the rest in that it bore an address: 70A Finchley Road, and an invitation to lunch.

With the Metropolitan Police, Pinkerton's, and now a specialist from Paris all active, Renwick had reason to examine the road behind him with some attention. At the Charing Cross stop he did so, and a taxi that had been parked near the station gates drew his eye: engaged, therefore occupied, the Stetson not visible but the cab position entirely consistent with having followed him from Fleet Street.

He descended from the bus quickly, crossed to the nearest shop doorway, and waited. The Stetson appeared at the taxi window; a pair of sharp grey eyes scanned the pavement.

Renwick's calculation was rapid. He went across the road fast, straight into the Charing Cross underground entrance. He bought a ticket with the efficiency of a man who has practiced exactly this manoeuvre, and went to the top of the stairs. With his head just above floor level, he watched.

The broad-brimmed hat came through the entrance at a controlled run. Royce took in the booking hall with a single comprehensive glance, bought a ticket without breaking stride, and got into a lift that was about to close.

Renwick went back up, crossed the road, and took a taxi from the rank outside the station.

The New Journalism, he reflected, had its compensations.

He paid off the cab at the corner of Finchley Road and walked to No. 70A.

It was one of those small, slightly withdrawn houses—old brick, set back from the street behind a trim hedge—that survive in certain parts of London as a kind of quiet reproach to the red-brick modernity around them. He opened the gate, walked around the short drive, and was at the door before he had thought to ring.

The door opened. The man who had opened it wore conventional dark clothes, but had a quality of stillness and composure that suggested he was not English, and not quite European. His salutation was silent and precise, and without a word of inquiry he conducted Renwick to a small room on the left of the hall and withdrew.

The room was the one he remembered.

Red granite floor—or at least faced with it. Smooth plastered walls. An unglazed window onto a small walled garden. An old lamp in a niche. A table of great age, heavily carved and black with use, bearing its usual disorder of books and papers. The rough fibre mat, the carven chair. And across the further end

of the room, a curtain of Damascene silk, rich and dim, veiling whatever lay behind it.

Anton Mercator rose from behind the table. He wore a long, loose garment in dark wool, the kind of thing that has been made in essentially the same way for a very long time. The expression with which he extended his hand was one of genuine pleasure.

"My dear Renwick. I am very glad you made it."

Renwick shook his hand, and felt, as he always felt in this man's presence, the particular force of someone for whom every conversation is genuinely of interest.

"The armchair," said Mercator, "which is behind you and which you were about to miss. Please do sit. I know you find my arrangements peculiar."

Renwick found the deep, cushioned armchair and settled into it. There was a perfume in the air—the familiar yellow cigarette smoke, and something else, aromatic, that he could not name.

"Ah," said Anton Mercator. "You noticed."

He passed an ebony case across the table, containing cigarettes of a dark yellow. Renwick took one and lit it. It had a flavour that was simultaneously strong and deeply pleasant, and utterly unlike any tobacco he had encountered.

"I am afraid there is a small quantity of opium in those," said Mercator.

Renwick looked up sharply.

"You needn't be concerned," said the other, with a faint smile. "You cannot acquire the habit from a single cigarette, and these are in any case unobtainable in London. They are old, as

blends go. Their lineage considerably predates the received history of tobacco use in the West."

And so, with the melody of his voice and the breadth of his knowledge, he reasserted his hold on Renwick's imagination. It was a genuinely unusual hold. Mercator moved through subjects the way a man moves through a house he has lived in for decades: from the organisation of the intelligence apparatus of the Assyrian kings through to the internal workings of the modern Criminal Investigation Department, with the same ease, the same settled authority, making the one feel as immediate as the other.

"I should mention," said Renwick at some point, "that an attempt was made to follow me here."

Mercator waved one long hand.

"It is tiresome for you. I give you my word that you will not be compromised through me. Come—lunch is waiting. But first, I want to show you something."

He stood, and looked for a moment towards the garden window—not quite at it, but past it, as though the garden were simply the near edge of something much larger that he was considering.

"Will you ever tell me," said Renwick, with the directness that was one of his professional virtues, "who you really are? Where the authority comes from? What all this is ultimately *for*?"

Anton Mercator turned and looked at him steadily.

"I will," he said, "when the day arrives for it—if it does." A shadow moved through his expression. "I am a dreamer, Renwick, and possibly a trifle mad. I am trying to wield something that

those who came before me were content to leave unused. The source of what you call my authority—its emblem, at any rate—is there.”

He pointed towards the Damascene curtain.

“May I see it?”

The quizzical smile, the one Renwick had seen before on occasions when the man found him predictable.

“Oh, Renwick,” said Anton Mercator. “A day may come. But not today.”

He took Renwick by the arm and led him into the hall, where three framed photographs hung in a row.

“Look at these,” he said. “The three best investigative minds currently active in Europe and America. Mr. Brinsley Monro, of Dearborn Street, Chicago. Mr. Ben Darling, of Chancery Lane. And last, and greatest, M. Victor Margaud, of Paris.”

“Is Berthier working under his direction?”

“M. Margaud took personal charge of the case this morning.”

Renwick looked at the photographs and then at his host. Victor Margaud—the inventor of the anthroposcopic identification system, the most formidable investigative theorist of his generation—was a different proposition from what had come before.

Anton Mercator smiled. He placed both hands on Renwick’s shoulders and looked at him with an expression of complete and almost teasing confidence.

“This,” he said, “is the part of the business I genuinely enjoy. It keeps me sharp.” He steered his guest towards the dining room. “This evening I shall have a story for you—a genuine exclusive. Arrange to be free at about ten. I will send you the

address. If you ring the bell of the house you are directed to and receive no answer, go away; I will reach you another way. But do not miss it. And now—lunch."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A WHITE ORCHID

Whoever could have looked into a certain bare room at New Scotland Yard some three hours after Renwick had left Finchley Road would have concluded that the net around Anton Mercator was drawing considerably tighter than he supposed.

Behind a large table bare of everything except sheets of paper, a metal pen tray, and an expression of focused impatience, sat Chief Inspector Bingham. Arranged on three uncomfortable chairs were Detective Sergeant Pryde, Mr. A. X. Royce, and M. Berthier of Paris. Royce, as befitted a non-official visitor, maintained a posture of ostentatious deference towards the inspector in whose room he found himself.

"We may take it, then," said Bingham, with a shrewd glance that swept the American and the celebrated small Frenchman in a single movement, "that when Mercator is not in disguise, he is a man of such exceptional appearance and such pronounced personal quality that he would be noticed anywhere. What else do we know? Mr. Royce volunteers the information that H. T. Renwick of *The Gleaner* visited a Finchley Road address this morning in circumstances suggesting that address belongs to Mercator. We have Sir Leopold Halford's confirmation that this pressman is acquainted with the man. A private source with knowledge of the city's financial circles has declined to state that they have no knowledge of Mercator's identity—which tells us something. And none of us"—a rather harder look at the others—"have any idea

where he actually lives, beyond the general probability of London. There are two private rewards outstanding totalling three thousand pounds, which are of more direct interest to Mr. Royce than to the rest of us. And this morning M. Berthier receives advice that his chief is coming over immediately. So we are all as well informed as each other"—another direct look at the French and American representatives—"and can proceed accordingly."

After this conference, from which each member had primarily sought to extract more than he contributed, M. Berthier emerged into Whitehall and very nearly collided with a tall man who was coming the other way.

The man wore a long dark coat with a wide cape collar in the style favoured occasionally by the theatrical profession, and an exceptional black felt hat with a brim of operatic proportions. His gait had a quality that the little Frenchman could only describe as regal: the unhurried stride of a person who has never found it necessary to move out of anyone's way. His face, which the hat half-shadowed, was dark and of a beauty that made Berthier, who was a connoisseur, catch his breath.

With the ease of long practice, he fell unobtrusively into step behind this distinguished figure.

His subject walked to Charing Cross Station without hesitation and went directly to the courier services counter. Berthier also had an errand that suddenly required attention in the same direction. He positioned himself to observe whilst appearing occupied with something else, but was entirely unable to get so much as a glimpse of what the man was writing or what

address he gave. The sealed envelope was handed across the counter with the composure of a man posting his morning correspondence. Then he turned and walked out—and at the door he turned once more, looked directly at Berthier, and raised his hat with a slight, ironic bow.

The detective knew a Parisian criminal's characteristic bravado when he saw it, and it decided his next move. He stepped quickly back to the counter.

"Excuse me," he said to the clerk in his fluent English. "I am M. Berthier of the Paris police." He produced his credentials. "The person who has just left sent a delivery. I need to see the addressee."

The clerk shook his head.

"That's not something I can do without official authorisation from the Metropolitan Police."

Berthier, who was above all things a practical man, did not waste a moment's argument. It cost him something to share this intelligence with another; but it cost him more to lose it. Within seven minutes he was at New Scotland Yard, and within fifteen he was back again, accompanied by Inspector Bingham.

The record was inspected. In the notebooks of both officers was subsequently written:

"Renwick, The Gleaner, Tudor Street. Linden Cottage, Dulwich Village, eight tonight."

Returning to the Astoria to prepare for the evening, Berthier found a visitor already in his room.

A large-boned man sat writing at the window desk. He had a great, sparsely covered skull, a thin and slightly disordered beard, and an expression, even in profile, of enormous intelligence worn with the impatience of someone who finds the world's processing speed perpetually insufficient. At Berthier's entrance he cast a slow look over one shoulder from beneath very heavy eyelids.

M. Berthier bowed with considerable feeling.

It was Margaud.

The forces now taking the field were not to be underestimated. France, England, and the United States were combining against Anton Mercator. At Linden Cottage, it seemed, he was about to encounter the most formidable opposition the case had yet generated.

At twenty-five minutes to seven, a constable in plain clothes reported to Bingham's office.

"Well, Pruett?"

"Linden Cottage, Dulwich, was let by the Old College authorities, sir, to a Mr. Tarleton, approximately a month ago."

"What does he look like, this Mr. Tarleton?"

"Tall, sir. Very dark. Described as remarkably good-looking. The College secretary said he looked like a stage actor."

"Tarleton-Anton," said Bingham quietly. He allowed himself a moment. "Daring. All right, Pruett. You know where to position yourself. Go."

Fifteen minutes later Berthier arrived, looking slightly chastened. He had been subjected, briefly, to the great Margaud's opinion of his telegram operation.

"Five methods occur to me immediately, stupid pig," the great man had said, "by which you might have obtained the same information without involving anyone else."

Heavy with the consciousness of having failed to conceive even one such method, M. Berthier came into Bingham's room.

"Is M. Margaud joining us tonight?" inquired Bingham.

"His plans are uncertain, m'sieur."

They were joined by Pryde, and all three entered one of the taxis that habitually waited in the Yard's forecourt and set out for Dulwich.

The night was very dark, with the particular quality of a London sky that has decided it will rain and is simply choosing its moment. As the cab came past Westminster Abbey a large car ahead swung around the corner by Sanctuary. Pryde, whose professional competencies included an encyclopaedic knowledge of certain social vehicles, sat forward.

"That's Hollister's car ahead. Going our way—the Embankment's closed for works. I wonder what Royce's operation is tonight."

"I'd be interested in what's in that car," said Bingham.

Pryde took up the intercom to the driver. "Kill the interior light, and pull up alongside that car ahead as close as you can manage. She's not moving fast. Hold it until I say."

The taxi accelerated with a jerk, swung out around a bus, and closed on the larger vehicle. Through the illuminated rear window, two women were visible in the back seat. One was chestnut-haired and animated; the other—fair, with her travelling coat worn open over evening things—was reading a document of some kind in the near corner. At her breast was pinned a large white orchid, its petals splashed at the centre with deep crimson.

Pryde was attempting, with the attention of a man trying to read in a moving vehicle through another moving vehicle's window, to make out the writing on the document, when the fair woman looked up and her expression changed. A quick intelligence flared in her eyes as she took in the cab alongside. The taxi slowed and fell back; the larger car accelerated and was gone within moments.

"That was Miss Zoe Hollister," said Pryde.

"I know," said Bingham. "The fair one—who was she?"

"Lady Beatrice Ashford. Her father has a political function at Downing Street tonight. I should think she's heading there."

"And Miss Hollister with her?"

"Going as a guest, most likely. It's the sort of evening the Opnners get invited to now."

"She of the golden hair and the white *odontoglossum*," sighed the little Frenchman, with a regret that was perfectly genuine.

They subsided into professional silence as the cab carried them across Vauxhall Bridge and south through the city's changing geography, from prosperous to ordinary to the comfortable retirement of Dulwich Village.

P.C. Pruett, in plain clothes, was at his designated corner. He saluted as they approached. Royce, materialising from a nearby doorway, joined them with the quiet efficiency that characterised all his movements.

Bingham organised dispositions with the brisk economy of a man who is good at this. Pruett and a constable to the front gate. Pryde and Royce to the east and west flanks. Berthier to the south garden. Bingham himself on the road opposite, with clear sight of the approach.

Then they waited.

At ten minutes past seven a taxi came up the rough lane and discharged Renwick at approximately the point where the surface became intolerable to the driver. The journalist walked to the cottage, found the bell-pull, and rang three times. Nothing answered. He stood a moment, then turned and walked back towards the village, passing within ten feet of Bingham without seeing him. He did not know that he had walked to his own appointment under the scrutiny of five pairs of eyes, two of which belonged to the best investigators in their respective countries.

The promised rain arrived.

It fell with the commitment of a London rain that has been accumulating since morning: a steady, cold, comprehensive downpour that sang through the poplars around the cottage and turned the ruts of the lane into channels within minutes. The watchers, distributed around a dark and apparently uninhabited cottage in a steadily worsening downpour, demonstrated the stoical persistence that this profession requires.

At eight minutes past eight, a figure appeared at the far end of the lane.

It was impossible, at that distance in the rain, to determine whether it had arrived by car or on foot. A tall figure, completely enveloped in a long, caped coat and a broad-brimmed hat that the rain was making its acquaintance with, walked with a very particular stride down the lane—confident, unhurried, the stride of someone entirely at home in the situation—and entered the gate of the cottage.

M. Berthier, from his post in the rhododendrons to the south of the door, watched the approach with the focused pleasure of a chess player watching a piece move exactly where he anticipated.

"It is he," he muttered. "The Mercator."

The figure produced a key, opened the cottage door, and went in. Per the pre-arranged plan, the watchers closed silently on all four sides of the building. Bingham told himself that his dispositions had been sound.

He walked to the door and rang.

Inside: a door banged sharply.

He rang again. Then again.

The rain fell. Nothing else moved within.

Bingham whistled.

On the signal, Berthier broke the window he was guarding, spread his coat over the jagged glass, pressed the catch, and stepped into the dark kitchen beyond. An answering crash from the opposite side told him that Pryde had done the same through the east window.

Berthier moved forward in the darkness, torch in one hand and revolver in the other. A sound behind him brought him around instantly.

A figure was climbing in over the window ledge he had just used.

"Ah!" he hissed. "Quickly! Identify yourself!"

"Ssh, my Berthier," came a thick voice. "You think I will allow myself to be excluded from a beautiful case like this one?"

Berthier directed his torch.

It was Victor Margaud.

M. Berthier bowed, torch still in hand.

"Waste no time," said Margaud. "That door."

He was pointing to the kitchen's interior door. Berthier tried it.

"Locked."

"Yes. I thought so."

"Hullo!" came Bingham's voice through the broken window.

"Who's in there, Berthier?"

"It is M. Margaud, m'sieur l'inspecteur. Allow me to present the great—"

"Spare the ceremony," said Bingham. He was already climbing through. "Is the front door unguarded, Mr. Margaud?"

"My man Pruett is on the door, and Royce with him," said Bingham, before Margaud could express an opinion on the question. "We have the room in front completely covered."

"Very well," said Margaud, with a brevity that conveyed neither approval nor its opposite. "Three ways. Through this

door, or through the door which your colleague holds in the room to the east. Or through the front window of the sitting room, given that the far window there is heavily barred and in any event visible from the front gate."

"Front window," said Bingham. "Pryde?"

"Here," came Pryde's voice from the next room.

"Empty on your side?"

"Nothing. Empty room. Locked door. What's happening?"

"Stand by. M. Margaud has joined us. I'm going around to the front."

He listened a moment. They all listened.

The rain on the roof, steady and unhurried, and nothing else.

Bingham climbed back out, went around through the laurel bushes to the front, and broke the sitting room window. He used his coat on the glass, exactly as Berthier had, with the particular satisfaction of a man imitating a Frenchman's method. Pruett's bull's-eye lantern lit the small room for him.

He went straight to the one hiding place: the space beneath a large sofa against the wall. He searched it with his hands in the dark.

On the plain oval table lay a long caped coat, completely soaked from the rain, and a wide-brimmed hat.

The two interior doors—other than that guarded by Pruett and Royce on the front—opened respectively into the room where Pryde stood and the kitchen where Berthier and Margaud stood. Both keys

were missing. The front window through which Bingham had entered was the only unbarred window on that face of the cottage.

All five watchers had seen the figure enter. All had heard the door bang when Bingham rang. Not one exit had been unobserved for a single instant.

The cottage was empty.

When the others had searched every inch and converged on Bingham in the sitting room, Pryde picked up the soaked coat from the table. He exclaimed.

"Damn!" said Berthier at his elbow, characteristically finding exactly the right word in the wrong language. "*Un odontoglossum blanc*, with crimson spots!"

On the polished wood beneath the coat lay a white orchid.

They looked at one another across the table.

"He is very handsome," said the little Frenchman, with a sigh that was not entirely related to the case.

"It is a considerable advantage," said his chief, with the composure of a man lighting a cigarette while others are still bewildered. "Women find it interesting, and they are extremely useful. It was the women who restored your English Charles the Second. He was also eventually their undoing. This orchid suggests to me immediately two solutions."

M. Berthier suffered from a slight catarrh that the evening's rain had no doubt promoted. He lacked, however, the courage to meet the drooping gaze of his chief.

They were some distance from the cottage when Pryde, who was carrying the coat over his arm, asked:

"By the way—who has the orchid?"

No one had it.

"M. Berthier," said Margaud, with a magnanimous calm, "of all the stupid pigs you are the most complete."

Bingham ran back. Pruett was still at his post outside. The inspector went through the window and searched the room, and the table, and the floor beneath the table, with the thoroughness of a man who cannot quite believe what he is finding.

"Pruett."

"Sir?"

"You have heard or seen nothing since we left?"

Pruett stared through the broken window with an expression of genuine incomprehension.

"Nothing, sir. Not a thing."

The white orchid was gone.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THREE LETTERS

Renwick did not remain long at the Downing Street function. The rooms were overcrowded and airless in the particular way of large official gatherings where everyone present is at some level working. The idea he had been unable entirely to suppress—that Anton Mercator might somehow materialise in that political crush—proved, as his common sense had insisted it must, to be unfounded. He wondered why the appointment had not been kept; he wondered when the promised story would arrive.

That he had been followed from the office he was aware, but the surveillance was no longer particularly troubling to him. The Dulwich address had most likely been obtained, but that was no fault of his own, and Mercator seemed to regard all their efforts with something between amusement and complete indifference. It presumably did not matter.

On his way out he passed two large, rather quickly-moving men in suits that did not quite fit their frames. He knew detective officers when he saw them. He took a cab at the corner and settled back with a cigarette.

There was a letter in his pocket that he had no memory of placing there.

He took it out and opened the plain envelope with considerable attention.

It contained a correspondence card and a letter. Both of these, and a third letter which reached its recipient the

following morning—whilst all England and a great deal of France were occupied with the extraordinary content of No. 2—are reproduced here in full.

* * *

No. 1

"MY DEAR RENWICK,—I enclose the promised exclusive. It will appear in no other London paper, but in two Paris papers tomorrow. Forgive me for sending you to Dulwich. I did so for a private purpose of my own, and rely upon your generosity to excuse the liberty. I write this in advance of visiting Downing Street, where it will be quite impossible, in so large a gathering, to speak to you directly. Do not be uneasy that there exists evidence of complicity between us. You are safe, I assure you."

* * *

No. 2

"To the Editor of *The Gleaner*.

"SIR,—I desire to show myself, as has ever been my practice, a man of honour; and I presume to request the

use of your most valuable columns for that purpose. I address the British public through *The Gleaner* as the most liberal journal in London, and that most opposed to government by plutocracy.

"As the inventor of the digital system of identification, of the anthroposcopic method, and of the Code which bears my name, I am known to your readers, as well as for my forty years of labour against criminals of all classes and all nations. I have been called the head of my profession. Shall I be accused of vanity if, with my hand on my heart, I acknowledge that tribute and say: it is well deserved?

"I resign today my office as Chief of the department which I have so long directed, no longer being in a position to perform my duties as a man of honour, since I have been instructed to take charge of what is called 'the Anton Mercator case.'

"It is the first time that my duty to France has run contrary to my duty to the great and marvellous man whom you know by that name, and to whom I owe all that I have, all that I am; whose instructions I may not and would not disregard.

"By his instructions I performed today a small deception upon the representatives of English law and upon one of my most esteemed colleagues—a capable and honourable man for whom I cherish the highest regard, and whom I would wish to see appointed to the office I now resign. He is not one of Us, and in every respect he is a worthy candidate for that post.

"I was honoured by instructions to impersonate my Leader. No reference to my powers of disguise is required here. I took the place of him you call Anton Mercator at a certain Linden Cottage in Dulwich. I entered with the key he had entrusted to me—too rapidly to be detained, had anyone attempted it, and none did, which was an error of strategy (see *Code*, pp. 336-43). In the darkness inside I placed his coat and hat upon the table. I overlooked something in the gloom, but no matter; I correct my errors: it is the secret. I was not otherwise disguised. It was not necessary. I waited until one of the watchers broke into the small room at the rear. I stood beside that window. Noiseless as the leopard I stepped behind him as he entered. I could have done him injury with ease. I did not. I announced myself. *I* was entering, too!

"Why should I name the man to whom I offered thus the one great chance of a lifetime? No; I am too old at

this game. He overlooked nothing more than another would have done. No more than I.

"But although outside it poured with rain, my clothes were scarcely damp. How had I watched and kept dry?

"He did not ask himself. No matter. I gave him his chance. We French, today, are sportsmen!

"I understand that my Leader arranged this *contretemps* with deliberation, in order to bring my position to an end and to make prominent this statement; and I am instructed to remind the relevant authorities that certain state secrets of international importance are in my possession, and therefore in his. But above all I would assure France and the world that no shadow of dishonour rests upon my name because I have served two masters. My great Leader has never employed, and never will employ, this knowledge to any improper end. But he would have my Government understand something—so very little—of his influence and of his reach. He would have them recall those warrants for his apprehension that class him with brigands and ruffians—that are an insult to a man who has never done wrong to a living soul, but who has only exercised the fundamental, the eternal, the universal Law of Justice.

"I loved my work and I love France. But I do not grieve. Other work will be given to me. I make my bow; I disappear. Adieu!

"I am, sir, your obedient servant,

"VICTOR MARGAUD

"(late, Service de Sûreté)"

* * *

No. 3

(Received by Lady Beatrice Ashford)

"When, in your brave generosity, you accompanied your friend and mine on her journey to warn me that Mr. Hollister's people had a plan for my capture, I knew the moment you stepped into Linden Cottage that Miss Hollister had chosen her companion well. I did not regret having entrusted that address to her discretion. The warning proved unnecessary, but I valued it no less for that. By an oversight for which I reproach myself, a clue to your presence was left behind when—but a few minutes before the police arrived—we left the cottage, having served our purpose. Another of my good friends secured it in time. I have it now. It is a white

orchid. I have ventured to keep it, that it may remind me of the gratitude I owe to you both."

CHAPTER TWENTY

CLOSED DOORS

"Why can't they open the doors? I can see there are people inside!"

A sound like a storm arriving drowned the querulous voice.

"Move along, please! Move on! Move on!"

The police instructions, monotonous and futile, rose above the sustained drone of the crowd. Motor buses made uncertain navigation through the narrow street. At the corner of Chancery Lane a newsagent's board displayed its priorities:

IS ANTON MERCATOR IN BERLIN?

CITY BANK COLLAPSE: DOORS CLOSED

From almost the Courts to the heavily guarded entrance of the Chancery Legal Credit Society ran that deep and wretched queue. To some in it, those closed doors meant the sacrifice of some small luxury of life; to others they meant something considerably more definitive than that.

"Move along, please! Move on! Move on!"

"All right, constable," said Sir Richard Carrick, with a smile that cost him something. "I'll move on. And move out."

He extricated himself from the press and crossed to the opposite pavement, where he stood in the posture of a man lost in thoughts he would prefer not to be having. He was entirely

unaware of the approach of a fair girl who had already attracted the attention of a considerable number of the lawyers' clerks in the vicinity. She came up to him with tears on her lashes, and he still did not see her.

"Dick."

He looked up. A flush crossed his face, and the look of pleasure that followed it was gone as quickly, replaced by the expression of a man who would rather not be seen in this particular state by this particular person.

"Is it true, then?" she asked softly.

He nodded, lips compressed.

"Who told you I had my savings in this one?"

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Does it?"

"Come away from here."

In silence they walked away from the noise of the depositors.

"Move along, please! Move on!"

They went into a café and found a corner table. Carrick ordered tea with the distracted efficiency of a man who is not thinking about tea at all. It was possible that Lady Beatrice Ashford had not previously visited this particular establishment, but its novelty held no interest for her. It was only the self-possession acquired over a lifetime that kept her face still—that held back the tears she could feel behind her eyes, because the mute distress in Carrick's face was more than all his training could conceal.

After a moment she managed to speak, steadying herself between words.

"Had you—everything there, Dick?"

He nodded again.

"I was a fool," he said flatly. "Badly advised or poorly attentive or both—it doesn't much matter which. There are a dozen sound alternatives I didn't take. What is the use of going over it? I have spent two years acting as Cassian Krane's unofficial social secretary, and I have swallowed my dignity at every meal in the process. But I cannot start again, Mary. I shall have to let him break me and go abroad and make whatever I can of it."

He set both fists on his knees and a hand moved to his under the table. He held it for a moment and released it.

Mary was looking at the table, drumming her gloved fingers in that particular rhythm she had when her mind was moving faster than she was yet willing to let it speak.

"I loathe Cassian Krane," she said. "He is an absolute octopus. Even Father finds himself affected by him—I don't entirely understand why."

Carrick smiled, without warmth.

"But there is someone," she continued, still not looking up, "who might be able to prevent him from ruining your life, Dick."

She left a pause. He filled it.

"Anton Mercator."

She went pale.

"I only know—" she began, then stopped, and started again. "I believe he is a man who, whatever else one thinks of his methods, has a genuine concern for justice."

Carrick watched her carefully.

"He is a gifted outlaw," he said. His voice was not unkind, but it had an edge in it. "It troubles me, rather, to hear you speak well of him. Why do you? I have noticed this before. He is a criminal, Mary, whatever romance may surround him."

Her lips tightened.

"He is not," she said, meeting his eyes directly. "That is a very limited way of looking at it—"

Then she saw the pain in the grey eyes, and remembered what this day had cost him, and what he was sitting here contemplating. She reached across and took his arm.

"Oh, Dick. Forgive me. I am so desperately unhappy about it all, and I grasp at anything that seems to offer a way through."

So we must leave them there. There was a great deal in that corner table that wanted only a certain kind of pen to do it justice. But the tide of our narrative bears us elsewhere.

Mr. J. J. Hollister, when that evening he rose to address the company assembled in the private dining room at the Astoria, with Zoe at his elbow and six men of substantial means around the table, presented a study of his own. He was a seamed, spare, yellowish man, and he rose to his feet with the economy of movement of someone who has sat in enough meetings to know that every word counts. Zoe, beside him, in a dress that had been thought about rather more carefully than it appeared to have

been, was everything he was not: warm-coloured, alive, the kind of woman who makes a room feel different about itself.

Mr. Hollister said:

"Gentlemen,—We have met this evening for a special purpose. With everyone's permission, we will adjourn to the room I have reserved and consider what, if anything, can be done about Mr. Anton Mercator."

He led the way: his small, spare figure flanked by John Trevena (the King of Coolgardie, an iron-grey Australian of great physical resource), and by Baron Marburg, once more venturing upon English soil with the air of a man who has calculated his risks carefully.

Sir Leopold Halford followed, as immaculate as ever, his high bald dome catching the light as he walked, in conversation with a large, angular Scotsman whose features were organised with no particular attention to symmetry, and whose eyebrows had the quality of independent organisms. This was Hector Calthrop, who had built and endowed more public facilities than any private individual since Vespasian.

Last of all went Cassian Krane, with a smile of the type that Carrick had learned, over two years, to distrust at close range.

"You won't mind keeping Miss Hollister company, Carrick, while we get through this? It's rather out of your line. You'll be more at home here, I should think."

The room chosen for the conference was small—deliberately so. One door, opening to a short anteroom, which gave in turn

onto the corridor. One window. Sixth floor. When the six men had entered and Hollister had confirmed that the appropriate refreshments were laid on, he returned to the corridor where Mr. Royce stood.

"You will position yourself here," said Hollister. "No one comes in. No one. The anteroom makes us private enough; with both doors shut we cannot be heard from outside, and there is only the one window, which is six floors up. I think our conversation about Mr. Mercator will be sufficiently confidential."

Royce bit off the end of a cheroot, positioned his chair with professional attention to sight lines, and settled in.

In another room, Zoe and Sir Richard Carrick were occupied with a conversation that neither was finding very interesting.

Presently Zoe said, with the directness that was characteristic of her:

"Sir Richard, I know you'll forgive me saying this, but Mary is my closest friend, and she told me everything this afternoon. I understand what this loss means to you—and that you mean to resign your position with Mr. Krane and go abroad. I don't need to tell you how sorry I am."

He thanked her quietly. He was listening for something beyond the words, and with the part of his mind not occupied with that he was aware of a faint, reluctant hope—the kind that a man very thoroughly defeated in a day permits himself only because he cannot quite prevent it.

"Can nothing be done?" said Zoe. "The bank has failed for a great deal more than your portion of it. But in your individual case—is there truly no way?"

"I shall have to go," he said. "That's all."

"Oh—but—" She hesitated, then: "My father has various connections with Mr. Krane. Would you let me try?"

Carrick's better instincts asserted themselves firmly. Whatever else this day had done, it had not made him someone who accepted money from the daughter of J. J. Hollister.

"Miss Hollister," he said, "you are everything Mary has always told me you are. But it is quite impossible. I am grateful beyond anything I can say."

The finality of it closed the subject.

An hour passed. Then another.

Zoe grew quietly worried about her father. He was not well, and his doctor's instructions about avoiding prolonged business meetings were being ignored with the stubbornness of a man who considers himself an exception to medical advice.

Halfway through the third hour she made her decision.

"He has wasted quite long enough," she said—and the phrasing struck Carrick as oddly chosen. "I am going to tell him the conference is over."

She went into the corridor. Royce stood up as she appeared.

"Mr. Royce, I want to speak with my father."

He spread his hands with genuine apology.

"His instructions were very clear, Miss Hollister."

"His instructions did not specifically cover his own daughter. Please go in and ask him to come out for a moment."

Perceiving no entirely satisfactory alternative, Royce opened the corridor door, crossed the anteroom, and knocked at the inner door.

No answer.

He knocked again. Then again, and a fourth time. He looked back at Zoe with an expression that was beginning to change character.

He opened the door and went in.

Mr. Aloys X. Royce was not a demonstrative man. His professional life had exposed him to a considerable range of the unexpected. But what he found in that room produced from him a sound he would not ordinarily have made.

The room was in darkness. When he lit it with the torch he always carried—

It was empty.

The scene that followed defies description. Every telephone in the Astoria was immediately in use. Staff appeared from every direction. Police arrived in the kind of numbers that fill a corridor completely. Every lift bore its freight of investigators and pressmen. Every staircase was occupied simultaneously.

It was established within minutes that the electricity to that room had been cut at some point during the evening. Beyond that, nothing could be determined. Six men had entered a sixth-floor room with one guarded door and one window. Not one of them had left by the door—the expression on Royce's face settled that

question more conclusively than any technical argument could. The window was sixty feet above the street.

While others came and went, scribbling in notebooks and making urgent calls, Royce stood and looked at the open window with the fixed attention of a man who has temporarily run out of frames of reference. He was jostled, spoken to, ignored, moved around. He stood like a man in water, and gazed at the window, steadily and without apparent expectation of it offering an explanation.

Short of a building-scale mechanical system erected and removed in the course of an evening, he could conceive no method. He was recalled to himself by Carrick.

"Mr. Royce." Carrick's voice was urgent and controlled. "Can we actually do something? Scotland Yard is here in force and nobody seems to have a proposal."

Royce shook himself.

"Where is Miss Hollister?"

Carrick registered this with a start.

"I don't know. I'll find her."

He pushed through the people at the door, past Inspector Bingham who attempted briefly to stop him, and went quickly through the suite. In one room he found Zoe's maid in a state of considerable distress.

"Where is Miss Hollister?"

"She has gone out, sir. I don't know where. She went very quickly."

Carrick took the stairs. In the lobby:

"Has Miss Hollister left the hotel?"

"Yes, sir. About two minutes ago."

"Her car?"

"Not ready, sir. She took a cab."

"Did anyone hear the address?"

The doorman turned to the bell boy.

"Eccleston Square, sir," said the boy.

The Marquess of Ashford's house.

Carrick stood for one moment and understood it. In the disappearance of the six men upstairs, Zoe had seen Mercator's hand. She was worried about her father. She wanted Mercator reached—and she had not gone to him directly, because it was not she who had that particular channel open. It was Lady Beatrice.

He went out into the street without his hat. Krane's car was at the kerb. He got in.

"Eccleston Square," he said. "Quickly."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE
A CORNER IN MILLIONAIRES

As Krane's car turned into Eccleston Square, a girl in a dark travelling coat—fair-haired, moving quickly—came out of Lord Ashford's house, got into a waiting taxi, and was driven away.

"Stop!" said Carrick.

The car pulled up as the cab passed on the other side.

"Follow that cab."

Through Mayfair, through Regent's Park, into Finchley Road. Carrick sat forward and felt himself trembling with the particular fury of a man whose worst deductions are proving correct. Fifty yards short of the gate he stopped the car and watched as Lady Beatrice stepped out of the cab, opened the gate, and went through.

The taxi driver looked at the hatless man in evening clothes who passed him a moment later without a word, but professionally declined to comment.

At the door Carrick was searching for a bell when it opened silently. The man who had opened it—formal, dark-clothed, with the contained quality of someone trained to complete discretion—made a gesture of quiet welcome and showed him to a small reception room off the hall. He withdrew without having spoken.

Carrick stood a moment. He was aware that what he was about to do had a name, and the name was not complimentary. But the evening had been the worst of many difficult ones, and his capacity for careful behaviour had reached its natural end.

From somewhere along the hall he heard a voice he knew.

He went to a draped door, knocked once, and entered without waiting.

The room was the one he had heard described but never seen. Stone floor, plaster walls, the antique lamp with its globe of light sitting quietly on the massive table covered in papers. A carved chair. The Damascene curtain veiling whatever lay behind it at the far end.

Before the curtain stood Lady Beatrice Ashford. Pale, entirely composed, and looking at him with an expression in which scorn and reproach were divided in proportions he found impossible to challenge.

"Has your friend run away then?" Carrick said, and the roughness in it came from somewhere he had not intended.

She said nothing. She simply looked at him.

"I know whose house this is," he continued, and the anger was breaking up now into something less controlled. "I know why you've come. What is he to you? Why do you know him, visit him, protect him? This is all I needed. After everything else, this is all I needed. I don't have a single good memory to take away with me."

His voice broke on the last few words.

"Mary," he said, and all the anger was gone. "Tell me. There's a simple explanation. I know there is. Tell me what it is."

"You shall hear it, Sir Richard."

He turned sharply.

A man stood in the open doorway. He was tall, and wore a closely cut dark coat in a manner that certain people can carry and most cannot. The expression with which he regarded Carrick was not unkind, but it had in it the calm of a man who is not uncertain of his ground. Carrick felt the force of his presence with the same slightly disorienting sensation of a strong field—the same quality he had half-noticed in the Stetson-wearing figure at the Marchwood dinner, now without the disguise.

Anton Mercator.

"Himself, Sir Richard."

Carrick had not spoken. He met the steady, luminous gaze, and found that the words he had been assembling had not quite arrived.

"You have behaved badly tonight," said Anton Mercator, with the measured quality of a person delivering an assessment rather than an accusation. Carrick was sufficiently surprised by this to be unable to cut across it. "I had identified you as a man whose friendship was worth having. Knowing the situation you are in and the purpose for which you have endured it, I had respected your position while waiting for the right moment to suggest that it was untenable and that you were better than it. I had supposed that a man who could earn a woman's regard of this quality must be essentially incapable of what I have just witnessed."

Carrick's hands tightened. He told himself that but for Mary's presence he would have knocked this extraordinary, over-presumptuous man down. He met the calm and compelling gaze. He said nothing. He did nothing.

"A woman may be judged," continued the even voice, "not by her capacity for love—that is common enough—but by her capacity for that rarer thing, friendship. A woman who, at considerable personal risk, goes alone to a place she has every reason not to visit, to do something for another woman that cannot help her own situation—that woman is a person of uncommon quality. You know now, I think, that I am not a rival. Something in you has already understood that."

And Carrick, to his own bewilderment, found that this was true.

"Here," said Mercator, "is the explanation."

He handed him a note:

"You gave me the secret of your address, so that I might visit or reach you, and I was coming tonight; but I have had a slight accident—not serious, but enough to prevent me going out. Lady Beatrice offered to go in my place. I will not give your confidence away, but our friendship cannot continue unless you release my father immediately—for I know this is your doing. He is not well and this is very unkind. I beg you to let him go at once. If you believe in true friendship and courage, do this in return for Lady Beatrice Ashford, who is risking everything to bring you this note.

"ZOE HOLLISTER"

"Miss Hollister," said Anton Mercator, "came down the stairs at Lord Ashford's too quickly, and sustained a minor injury—nothing serious, I'm relieved to say. Lady Beatrice brought me her message. I break no trust in showing it to you. There is a telephone at Eccleston Square where Miss Hollister is resting, and as you came through the door I obtained her spoken consent to do this."

"Mary." Carrick's voice was abrupt and he did not try to make it otherwise. "I know perfectly well that exhaustion and misery are not adequate justifications. But if I had not been in the state I was in, I could not have doubted for an instant. Will you forgive me?"

It was the only possible appeal, and it served.

Anton Mercator watched the reconciliation with a smile that belonged to a man considerably older in his understanding than in his years.

"The cloud has passed," he said. "I have something to say to you, Sir Richard. You have learned tonight a number of things about me: my appearance, my address, the identity of two of my associates. I do not particularly regret this, though I am a wanted man. Tonight I have committed an outrage which, when tomorrow's papers carry it, will demand very loud redress from the civilised world. You are at liberty to act entirely as you see fit. I ask one favour only: thirty-six hours' grace. Miss Hollister has already agreed. On my word of honour—if it is worth anything to you—I will not disappear. At the end of that time I

will offer you the same choice again: detain me or condone what I have done. Which is it?"

Carrick looked at him; then at Mary; then around the bare, lamp-lit cell of a room that was nothing like the den of a celebrated criminal and very much like the study of a very unusual scholar.

"I will wait," he said.

In less than thirty-six hours the world had its news.

At approximately the same time that Mr. Royce stood temporarily petrified in a certain room of the Hotel Astoria, two men in evening dress burst into a Wandsworth police station. One was a large, iron-grey Irishman. The other was a Scotsman whose language, as he peeled a false moustache from his upper lip, impressed the assembled constables, sergeant, and inspector with a depth and variety that none of them would shortly forget.

"What are ye sitting still for?" shouted the Scotsman, slapping a card on the desk. "I'm Hector Calthrop and this is John Trevena of Melbourne. We've been held up by the highwayman Mercator. Turn out every man you've got. Get moving!"

The accumulated force of the three names—Hector Calthrop, John Trevena, and Anton Mercator—galvanised the station without further delay. The story that emerged from the two shaken but indignant men appeared in every paper the following morning, and it cannot be better presented here than in the comparatively simple form in which it reached readers of *The Gleaner*:

SIX FAMOUS FINANCIERS TAKEN

ANTON MERCATOR ACTIVE AGAIN
REMARKABLE EVENTS AT THE ASTORIA

Under these headlines appeared a full account of the events already known to the reader.

DRAMATIC ESCAPE OF MR. TREVENA AND MR. CALTHROP
WHERE ARE THE MISSING MEN?
IS SCOTLAND YARD EQUAL TO THIS?

From Mr. Hector Calthrop, our representative obtained a full account of events that illuminated a mystery which would otherwise have appeared entirely insoluble. After the six men had entered the private conference room at the Astoria, nothing unusual occurred for approximately the first twenty minutes. Baron Marburg had just risen to make a proposal when the lights went out.

The room was plunged in complete darkness. Before anyone could establish what had happened, a voice—Mr. Calthrop stated it seemed to come from below the level of the table—spoke the following:

“Let no one speak or move. Mr. Trevena: place your revolver on the table.” (Mr. Trevena was the only member of the party who was armed, and had drawn it as the voice began.) “Otherwise, your son’s vessel the *Savannah* will be posted missing. Hear me out, each of

you, lest serious harm come to those you care about.

Mr. Calthrop: your sister and niece will disappear from the Villa Marina in Monte Carlo within four hours of any action taken by you without my specific permission.

Mr. Hollister: you have a daughter. She and you are entirely safe—at present. Baron Marburg, Sir Leopold Halford, and Mr. Krane: my people have instructions, which only I can countermand, to bring you before the appropriate financial authorities with documentation you would not wish them to have. I threaten only what I can deliver. Give the alarm if you choose. But I have warned.”

During this remarkable speech, shadowy figures were moving about the room. The precision of the threats had, for the time being, quite unmanned the six gentlemen—which is no cause for surprise.

Then, at a quiet command in a language none of the six recognised, four lamps—or rather, four globes of warm light—appeared at the four corners of the room. This extraordinary effect was produced by members of Mercator’s organisation who had entered in the darkness and now stood around the walls, four of them holding these peculiar globular lamps of a type entirely unfamiliar to those present. (A technical discussion of the possible construction of such lamps appears on page 6.)

Immediately inside the open window stood a tall, dark man in a closely cut dark coat. He carried no weapon but wore a black

silk half-mask. At this point, Mr. Calthrop informed our representative, Mr. Krane provided the scene with its most dramatic moment by exclaiming:

"Good Lord! It's Anton Mercator!"

"It is indeed, Mr. Krane," came the reply. "I trust you will respect my instructions accordingly. Mr. Trevena—your revolver is not yet on the table. I have given you two opportunities."

Mr. Trevena, who is not a man easily persuaded to inaction, evidently concluded that resistance at this moment served no purpose, and placed the revolver on the table with the controlled dignity of a man making a tactical deferral.

"I give you my word," Mercator concluded, "that no bodily harm will come to any of you provided you make no resistance. What follows is done purely as a precaution. Any sound would be inadvisable."

At his signal, the four globes were covered, and each of the six gentlemen were simultaneously seized in the darkness with an efficiency that made resistance impossible and a silence that made protest pointless. The men responsible were trained for this kind of operation in a way that left no question about their competence. Mr. Calthrop noted that so complete was the company's belief in Mercator's stated capacities that, with the single exception of Mr. Trevena, who was promptly and quietly held, no one attempted active resistance.

The means by which Mercator's associates had entered was then revealed. Each of the six—beginning with Baron Marburg—was lowered by rope to a window on the floor below, where other

members of his organisation waited to receive them. Access had clearly been made using a short ladder from that lower window; Mr. Calthrop observed such a ladder being used by the last of Mercator's people as they withdrew. The operation was completed in under seven minutes. It is worth noting that the south wing of the Astoria had recently been refaced with dark grey granite, that the night was moonless, and that anything visible at all would have been visible only from the distant Embankment. No element of the operation failed.

Once removed from the upper room to the lower, Mercator removed the gags, and—with the composure of a man conducting an inconvenient but necessary meeting—invited his guests to take some refreshments, as they had a considerable drive ahead of them.

Mr. Trevena demanded a full account of the outrage.

"Sir," was the reply, "it is not for you to demand. As a final demonstration of the arrangements I have made—and I assure you they are no less complete for each of your companions than they are for you: eight of the twelve men crewing your son's vessel, including two officers, are under my direct authority. A message can be sent, even if I myself am detained or dead, that will direct the *Savannah* to a course she will not return from. Shall I name the crew? Or are your reservations resolved?"

The insight thus provided into the reach of Mercator's network determined all six upon passive compliance. A man was then produced who skilfully disguised each of them in turn; Mr. Krane later told Mr. Calthrop that he believed he recognised in

this individual a practitioner whose name is well known in the theatrical profession. In three pairs, each accompanied by two of Mercator's people, they left the hotel. Disguised beyond recognition, they were brought to a large car with its blinds down and driven for approximately one hour.

At the end of this drive, Messrs. Calthrop and Trevena were informed by one of the three accompanying men that Anton Mercator wished to convey his sincere apologies for the inconvenience to which, unavoidably, he had been obliged to put them, and for the threats with which he had been compelled to reinforce his instructions—threats made only in what he described as "the most sacred interests." They were released from all obligations and at liberty to take whatever steps they considered appropriate. They were set down on Wandsworth Common, and the car departed.

It is almost impossible to accept that six men of international reputation could be kidnapped from a London hotel in this manner. But two things must be remembered: first, that for reasons readily understood they offered no resistance; second, that a number of people of foreign appearance had been residing for some time in the apartments directly below those occupied by Mr. Hollister, and the presence of the same individuals moving about the hotel at various hours had attracted no comment from staff or guests. It was subsequently discovered that these rooms had been occupied under the name of a foreign prince, and that the occupants had settled their accounts in full before departing. It was also established that the electricity to

one of these rooms had been interfered with. The police have a number of further threads to follow.

Within the following twenty-four hours the world had made the fullest possible use of whatever communications technology it had to hand. Every investigative resource that Scotland Yard could spare to the case was deployed. Nothing was found. The wives and closest relations of each of the missing men had received, posted from Charing Cross, a card that could be traced to no maker or stationer:

"Fear nothing. No harm shall befall a guest of Anton Mercator."

Then, in the stop press of *The Gleaner's* final edition:

"Baron Marburg, Sir L. Halford, Mr. Krane and Mr. Hollister have returned to their homes."

It is unlikely that in the history of newspapers there has ever been such a demand as that which worked the industry to near-exhaustion on the following morning.

Without pausing to consider the morning's full news, let us return to the Chancery Legal Credit Society.

"Move along, please. Move on. Move on."

Again the street is packed with people. But what a different scene, though outwardly so similar. For every face is flushed with excited, incredulous joy. They are pressing towards the bank

entrance again—but this morning the doors are open. Almost every person in that crowd holds a copy of the morning's paper. Every man and woman there knows that the missing financiers have refused to say a single word about their adventure—that all four of them have declined, absolutely and identically, either to confirm or deny the account of Messrs. Trevena and Calthrop. "The incident is closed," Baron Marburg is reported as saying. But the depositors of the Chancery Legal Care nothing for that. For is it not also announced that this particular quartet of public benefactors, together with a fifth who has modestly declined to be named, have between them put up the sum of three and a half million pounds to restore the failed bank?

"Make way there. Stand back, if you please."

Someone starts a cheer, and it is taken up and taken up again as a van moves slowly through the crowd. It is bullion from the Bank of England. Cash, and crisp notes. It is dead hopes raised from the ground; the future returned to the people who had believed it gone.

"Hip, hip, hip—"

The cheers filled the ancient lane.

It was as the last of them died away that Carrick, standing at the edge of the crowd, felt a hand on his shoulder.

He turned.

A tall man stood smiling at his elbow. Immaculate, dark, the large eyes holding now nothing but an invitation to friendship. He was entirely conspicuous and entirely untroubled by it.

"Anton Mercator!"

"Well, Carrick." The musical voice carried easily above the noise. "These good people would very much like to know the name of that anonymous friend who, with four others, has sought to return a little happiness to a grey morning. Here I am. And there, on the bank steps, are police." He looked at Carrick steadily and with complete composure. "Give me in charge, or give me your hand."

Carrick could not speak.

He took the outstretched hand and wrung it hard.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO
THE TURKISH YATAGHAN

It was about a fortnight later that a City physician, Dr. Hobbs, in the last light of a spring evening, could have been observed pressing through the crowd of excited people filling the lobby of an office building in Moorgate Street.

He addressed himself to a well-built, florid gentleman who showed the signs of recent shock.

"Dr. Hobbs. You called me."

The florid gentleman mopped his forehead with a silk handkerchief.

"I'm Cassian Krane. You'll have heard of me."

Everyone had, and Dr. Hobbs acknowledged it with a brief nod.

The two ascended the stairs.

"Stand back, please," the physician said crisply to the cluster of curious faces that had formed around them. "Will someone please contact the police and ring Scotland Yard? This is not a spectacle."

Abashed, the curious retreated. Hobbs and Krane went up alone. A small group of late workers from an upper floor were nervously peering into an open door bearing the name:

DOUGLAS CAWLEY

They stood aside for the doctor, who entered briskly with Krane behind him.

The outer office was dark, as was the room off it to the left; but from the inner office came a full flood of light. Douglas Cawley's private office was identical to a thousand other City offices of its kind, except in one particular.

Stretched on the rug before the desk lay a heavily built figure, face down. It was that of a fashionably dressed man, no longer young, who had received a blow from behind the left shoulder blade and whose life had run out in the dark stain soaking the rug beneath him.

The doctor bent, turned the body, made a rapid examination, and stood.

"Dead. Roughly half an hour."

Krane wiped his forehead.

"Poor Cawley. My God." Then: "Look at the desk."

Stuck upright in the litter of papers was a long curved dagger with an ornate hilt. Several documents were impaled on its stained point, and upon the topmost had been roughly printed:

"VENGEANCE IS MINE!

"ANTON MERCATOR."

Dr. Hobbs started visibly. He looked around the room with a new quality of attention.

In the silence of the dead man's room they stood looking at one another.

The physician's straight brows drew together as he looked, repeatedly, from the writing to the figure on the rug.

"Then his sins were great," he said quietly.

Krane shuddered.

"Let's go, doctor. I'm not well."

Dr. Hobbs raised a hand.

"One moment." He poured a measure from his bag and handed it to Krane. "Drink that. And give me two minutes before the police arrive."

Krane drank and watched while the physician went to his phone and made a call.

"Dr. John Hobbs speaking. Come at once to Moorgate Street. A murder has been committed and the weapon is highly unusual. Your expert opinion would be invaluable at this early stage. You *must* be here within ten minutes."

A pair of constables arrived before whatever the doctor had intended could be accomplished, and took over the scene. They established from Krane that he had held a financial interest in the Cawley business—that the business was of a moneylending character, that the deadman's real name was Paul Garston, that Krane had found the outer door secured when he arrived shortly after seven, let himself in with a key he held, and found Garston as they saw him now. The safe was open. Valuables and documents appeared to have been taken. The staff had left at six.

This was the position when Detective Sergeant Pryde arrived and, with his characteristic professional unhurriedness, took the matter in hand.

Dr. Hobbs checked his watch with impatience and moved to and fro in the outer office.

A few minutes later there was a sharp knock at the door. Hobbs opened it quickly, admitting an extraordinary personage: a tall, loose-jointed old man in a voluminous chequered travelling cape, whose coat sleeves protruded beyond it in search of his large, battered-looking shoes. His trousers had given up at the ankle. He wore an old-fashioned collar and a large black cravat. His hirsute face was deeply tanned to the even brown of long outdoor life, and his sharp eyes surveyed the room through thick-lensed spectacles beneath a slouched felt hat of eccentric proportions. From every pocket of the inverness something appeared to be trying to escape.

"Dr. Falco!" cried Hobbs. "Thank you for coming."

"Who's that?" called Pryde from the inner office, notebook in hand. "You should not have let anyone in."

"I have taken the liberty," replied Dr. Hobbs with composure, "of asking Dr. Emmanuel Falco, who I happened to know was in London, to look at the weapon. He is one of the foremost authorities in Europe on exotic edged weapons, and I thought you might welcome his view at this stage."

"Ah," said Pryde, revising his expression somewhat. "Well, if you can tell us something useful, sir, I'm grateful. I wish Bingham were here. These cases give me nightmares. And now we've got to murder, things are going to be extremely uncomfortable at the Yard."

"Yes, yes," said Dr. Falco, peering about him in the short, sweeping way of a man who takes in a great deal at once and conceals that he has done so. He spoke in a deep, rumbling voice with a pronounced accent of uncertain origin. "I would not have missed this. Where is the dagger? I have just returned from the Izamal temples of Yucatan. Obsidian knives. Sacrificial. Very beautiful."

He shuffled into the private office with an angular, restless energy, appeared to absorb every detail of it in one comprehensive glance, and descended upon the dagger with a hoarse exclamation. Pryde watched with curiosity. Cassian Krane, in the doorway, followed his movements with new attention.

"True Damascus," the old man muttered, running a long finger up the blade. "Hilt Persian—not Kultwork—Persian. Yes. Can I pull it out? Yes? Damascened to within three inches. Very early."

He turned to Pryde, the dagger in his hand.

"This is a Turkish yataghan."

The room received this information without obvious enlightenment.

"By which I mean that from a broken Damascus sword-blade and a Persian dagger handle, a yataghan of Turkish pattern has been made. Stones incrusting in the hilt but the blade is the thing of value. Very rare. Made in Persia for the Turkish market."

"One of Mercator's people did this," Krane said hoarsely.

"Ah, yes? So? I have read of him. He is associated with the great Margaud. I meet Margaud once." He peered with the magnifying-glass from his cape pocket over the surface of the

desk, then moved to the documents, the pigeon-holes, the chair, the rug, and finally went to his hands and knees on the floor, scratching at the carpet and examining it with minute attention.

Pryde glanced at Hobbs and tapped his temple discreetly.

"Humour him," murmured the physician. "He appears eccentric, but he is a man of extraordinary knowledge. If anything useful was done or left in this room in the last hour he will find it."

From beneath the table, the rumbling voice announced:

"There is a back stair. He left that way as someone arrived at the front."

Cassian Krane reacted sharply.

"Good God—then he was here when I came in!"

"Who speaks?" rumbled Falco, crawling towards the outer office, following something invisible to everyone else.

"Mr. Cassian Krane," explained Hobbs. "A financial partner of the late Mr. Garston's. He arrived at about seven and found the body."

"As our friend left by the back, Mr. Krane came in at the front," announced Falco.

Pryde gave rapid instructions to the constables, who went immediately.

"Are you certain of that?" he called.

The methods of the peculiar visitor were beginning, despite professional resistance, to make an impression on him.

"Certainly. But observe this."

Dr. Falco re-entered the inner office carrying several files.

"He begins to destroy letters. He has taken many away already. He has torn pages from the private accounts on the desk. He is interrupted by Mr. Krane's arrival. Do you know the address of Mr. Garston's secretary?"

"I'm already attending to that," said Pryde, with the appreciative expression of a man who has just been shown how his own thinking should have proceeded. "None of the staff know. They've all gone."

"Ah." Dr. Falco pocketed his glass. "No one wearing any distinctive clothing has done this. The killer wore gloves. There are no traces I can usefully attribute. I am no longer interested in the weapon itself. But here"—he placed a small object on the desk beside the yataghan—"is new evidence for you. A boot-button—foreign make. Now, if the great Margaud could be here. It is imagination that makes him supreme. In his imagination he would kill Cawley again with the yataghan. He would lose his button. He would run out as Mr. Krane comes in, taking the bills and letters from the safe, to some hiding-place. Once there, in ten minutes—his hand is on the shoulder of the real killer. What a case for him."

Pryde nodded.

"I wouldn't mind sitting in on that for half an hour," he said. "Though it's not likely he'd come near a Anton Mercator case at this point."

"You should travel, my friend," said Dr. Falco. "You would learn much of imagination in the desert or the forest."

When Pryde turned back from this exchange, he observed that the man from Yucatan had vanished.

The cleaning woman at Moorgate Place was the next to encounter Dr. Falco, and was entirely won over by his manner within two minutes. She knew that Miss Yardley, the dead man's secretary, regularly went to lunch and sometimes to tea with a young woman from the stockbrokers Messrs. Bowden and Ralph in Copthall Avenue. The staff there were working late. Dr. Falco thanked her, pressed a generous note into her hand, and went.

A fast car was waiting nearby. He reached Copthall Avenue inside eight minutes. The young woman from the stockbrokers was found. From her he obtained the address of Miss Yardley: a house in Stockwell Road.

A dingy landing, a door, a pretty brown-haired girl who rose to greet him and then stood uncertain, taking in the extraordinary apparition in the doorway.

"Miss Yardley," said Dr. Falco, in the paternal rumble that had been reassuring people for the last hour. "I have come to ask your help in a—"

He broke off. He had turned to the mantelpiece and was peering at a silver-framed photograph there. It was of a rather odd-looking young man, with the inscription: "To Iris. Lawrence."

"Good heavens," he exclaimed, with an air of delighted recognition. "Surely this is my old friend! Can it be—Gardener—Gaston—I never could keep his name. The good boy Lawrence Greely?"

Miss Yardley's eyes went wide.

"Marsden," she said, colouring. "You mean Marsden?"

"Ah! Marsden," cried the doctor triumphantly. "You know my old friend Lawrence Marsden? He is in England?"

"He has never left it, to my knowledge," said the girl, with sudden doubt.

"I am an old fool," said Falco. "It was his father who travels—in the East. Istanbul, I believe."

"Constantinople," corrected Miss Yardley.

"Still the old fool. To be sure. Constantinople."

A particular quality had crept into the eyes behind the thick spectacles.

"He used to say to me, the Marsden pere: 'I send that boy Turkish pipes and ornaments and curiosities for his rooms. I wonder if that bad fellow'"—Dr. Falco poked a jesting finger at the girl—" 'I wonder if he has sold them.'"

"I'm certain he wouldn't," flashed Miss Yardley. Then a cloud moved across her face. "That is—I don't think he would, if he could help it."

"Ah, those money troubles," sighed the old doctor. "But I entirely forgot my errand, thinking of Lawrence. There has been an-accident at your office, my child. He is quite well. Do not be afraid. Tell me—what time did you leave tonight?"

Iris Yardley had been retreating from him step by step, her eyes fixed on his face. She sank into the armchair. The colour had entirely gone from her cheeks.

"Why have you asked me those questions? You don't know Lawrence. What has happened? What has happened?"

She was trembling.

"I am afraid of you, Dr. Falco. I don't know what you want. Who are you? You have made me tell you everything. I will tell you nothing more."

"My dear," said Dr. Falco, and his voice was unexpectedly gentle, "a woman has the great gift of intuition. It is true. When I arrive, unexpected, you glance at his photograph. You associate him, already, with the unexpected. I experiment. Forgive me. It is by such leaps in the dark that things are found. You are a brave girl, and so I tell you directly: it is for you to save Lawrence. If Detective Pryde at Scotland Yard knew as much as I do, nothing could be done for him. I can do it—I. You shall help me. I work against time—against the police. A bargain: you answer my questions and I answer yours."

She nodded. Her fingers tightened on the arms of the chair. Through the eccentricities of the old traveller something else had shown itself briefly, intent and entirely awake.

"What time did you leave tonight?"

"Quarter past six."

"How many appointments had Mr. Garston after that? One with Lawrence. What other?"

"With Mr. Krane."

"No other?"

"No."

"What time was Lawrence's appointment?"

"Directly I left."

"Mr. Garston did not know you two are acquainted?"

"He did not."

"Had you access to his private accounts, the ones he kept in his safe?"

"No."

"You kept the files?"

"Yes."

"Who is the most important creditor under G? Lawrence?"

She shook her head.

"He only owed about fifty pounds. There was no one of consequence under G, except Glanville and Count de Grammont."

"Count de Grammont. Is he wealthy?"

"Very. He's selling everything in his flat and going abroad permanently. There's an advertisement in today's paper. His pictures and things are valued at thirty thousand at least. I don't know how his business stood with Mr. Garston lately—it had stopped coming through my hands."

"And his address?"

"59b Bedford Court Mansions."

"And I must see Lawrence too. Where?"

"At Bart's—St. Bartholomew's Hospital. He's studying there. You'll find him there until at least ten tonight."

Dr. Falco took her hand and held it for a moment.

"Do not faint. Be a brave girl. Your employer was killed shortly after you left."

She sat watching him, deathly pale.

"By—whom?"

"'By Anton Mercator,' so it is written on his desk. It is unfortunate that Lawrence was there tonight. But I am your friend, my child. Are you going to faint?"

"No," said the girl. She said it firmly, and it held.

"Then good-night."

He pressed her hand once more and was gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

M. LAURENT

The art of detection, in common with every other art, produces from time to time a genius; and a genius, whatever else he may be, is emphatically *not* a person having "an infinite capacity for taking pains." Such masters of criminology as Alphonse Bertillon, or his celebrated compatriot Victor Margaud—whose resignation had so recently stirred the world to wonder—achieve their results through painstaking work, yes, but that work would be more or less futile without that element of inspiration, intuition, call it what you will, which constitutes genius and alone distinguishes such men from the capable workhorses around them. A brief survey of the results Dr. Falco had already achieved within a single hour would show them to have been produced by imagination, deep knowledge of human behaviour, foresight, and—that other quality which resists definition.

Dr. Falco was studying an advertisement that Miss Yardley had marked:

FOR SALE.—Entire contents of large private flat, comprising furniture by Sheraton, Chippendale, Boulle, etc. Paintings by Greuze, Murillo, Van Dyck, also modern masters. Pottery: Chinese, Sèvres, old English, etc. A collection of 500 pieces of early pewter. The whole valued in excess of £30,000.

A fast car had brought him to Bedford Court Mansions. He shuffled up the front steps and addressed the porter.

"Has Count de Grammont gone out again this evening?"

"I haven't seen him go out, sir."

"Not since he came in earlier? About half past seven, would it have been?"

"Quite right, sir."

The odd gleam had come into the doctor's eyes again—the same gleam as when he had learned about Lawrence Marsden's father in Constantinople. He went upstairs, was about to ring the bell at No. 59b, then descended once more.

"The Count must be resting—he doesn't answer. He has discharged his staff, of course?"

"Yes, sir. He leaves England next week."

"Ah. He is alone, then."

Upstairs again.

He rang three times before the door was opened by a tall, slight man in a blue silk dressing gown. He had a distinctly pleasant face, and wore a neat moustache and beard in a Parisian style. He looked about thirty, was fair and blue-eyed and better-looking than his circumstances at this moment might have suggested.

"I apologise for the hour, Count," said the old doctor, in perfect French. "I believe I can make you an offer for some, if not all, of your collection."

He produced from the case in his sack-like pocket a card:

LÉO LAURENT

Fine Art Expert

London and Paris

Count de Grammont hesitated, looked at his visitor, looked at his watch, cleared his throat.

"If satisfied," continued M. Laurent, "I would hand you a cheque on BNP Paribas."

The Count bowed.

"Enter, M. Laurent. Your name is known to me."

It was indeed known in certain art circles.

Dr. Falco entered.

The room into which the Count led him was magnificently appointed. Fine furniture, pictures by artists of reputation, statuettes, vases, choice antiques at every turn. The visitor's feet moved through it with the silence of a man in deep water. It was the room of a wealthy connoisseur whose taste bordered on the fastidious. The doctor surveyed the Count without appearing to, hands thrust deep in his cape pockets, drifting from object to object—uninvited, from room to room—like a rudderless vessel. The Count followed, and in his pleasant face it could be read that he found the manner of M. Laurent slightly presumptuous.

Before a large painting by Van Dyck, the visitor suddenly cried:

"Ah, a forgery, m'sieur! Spurious."

Count de Grammont turned on him. The blue eyes had gone very cold, and a vein throbbed on his left temple.

"M'sieur!"

He seemed unable, for a moment, to do more than this. His sudden fury was absolute, volcanic.

Dr. Falco appeared not to have heard, then turned, and quickly:

"But I apologise—I most sincerely apologise. I was misled by the unusual tone of the brown. But no—no, it is beyond doubt. None other than Van Dyck painted that ruff."

The Count glared and breathed for a moment longer, then swallowed his fury and bowed in stiff acknowledgment. Dr. Falco was already away again, drifting between picture and cabinet and statuary.

"M'sieur," he rumbled, turning to look at de Grammont, who had taken up a position by the fireplace with his hands clasped behind him. "I believe I can make an offer for the entire collection. Would that be agreeable?"

The Count bowed.

"Ah!"

M. Laurent settled himself at the writing table in the beautiful study into which the Count had drifted with him. He produced a cheque book.

"Twenty thousand pounds, English?"

The Count laughed, briefly and without warmth.

"Twenty-two?"

"Do not jest with me, M. Laurent. Nothing below thirty."

"Twenty-eight is my absolute final. It is the figure I had determined before I arrived."

De Grammont considered, bit his lip, glanced at the open cheque book—always a persuasive argument—and bowed with considerable elegance.

Falco changed his spectacles for a larger pair, reached for the pen, and in doing so caught the heavy inkwell with his elbow. It toppled, and ink ran in a dark stream across the leather top of the table.

"Ah, clumsy! Blotting paper, quickly, I beg you."

The Count retrieved some from a drawer and absorbed the damage, looking at his own ink-stained fingers with an expression of considerable displeasure. Falco rumbled apologies, and when the worst was cleared, made out a cheque for £28,000 payable to "The Count de Grammont, in settlement for the entire contents of Flat 59b, Bedford Court Mansions," signed it "L. Laurent," and handed it across.

The Count examined it.

"M'sieur, you have written two thousand, eight hundred."

"Ah!" The doctor appeared genuinely mortified. "The amount was so much in my mind. Forgive an old fool. Give it back; I will write another correctly."

A second cheque was prepared. The Count examined it with the attention of a man who has just been given cause.

Dr. Falco rose to go.

"One moment, m'sieur."

He sat again.

"You have written the beneficiary as 'The Comte de Grammont.' The spelling—"

"Ah, still the old fool," cried Falco, with magnificent self-reproach. "Give it here."

A third cheque, correct in all particulars, was handed across. Falco shuffled to the door, declining the Count's offer of refreshments. He was already on the landing when:

"Heavens! I am truly an absent-minded man. I wear my reading glasses and have left my street glasses on your table. One moment. No, I would not trouble you."

He shuffled back to the study and returned almost immediately, glasses in hand.

"Would seven-thirty in the morning be too early for my people to begin the inventory?"

"Not at all."

"Good night, m'sieur le Comte."

"Good night, M. Laurent."

So concluded one act of this strange comedy.

Let us turn, for a moment, to Thomas Renwick of *The Gleaner*, who sat in his study at midnight with his head in his hands and his pipe cold.

He had spent the early part of the evening at Moorgate Street, had written his account of the murder, seen it into the system, and come home in a state of mind that was the worst he had been in since all this began.

Now, in the quiet of his house, he was listening. Every late car in the street set his pulse quick, for he was listening for Anton Mercator.

His faith was badly shaken.

He had been content to know himself the confidant of the man who had taken from Park Lane to give to the Embankment. Of the man who had compelled four great financiers to contribute to rescuing a wrecked bank. Of the man who, with Margaud's assistance, had made Scotland Yard look comprehensively outmanoeuvred. But to have called "friend" the man who had murdered, or caused to be murdered, Paul Garston—whatever Garston's character had been—was something Renwick could not sit with.

It meant: if Mercator did not come tonight and clear himself, Renwick must go to the police in the morning and give them everything he knew. At whatever personal cost. He had thought about this clearly and reached the same conclusion each time.

A key turned in the front door lock.

Renwick was on his feet before he had finished the thought. A quiet step in the hall, and Anton Mercator came in.

The journalist could find nothing to say. He stood and looked at the fine, composed face. Those large dark eyes had something new in them tonight: an urgency behind the usual calm.

Mercator extended his hand. Renwick shook his head and turned to look at the dying fire.

"You, too, my friend?"

Renwick turned back.

"Tell me you had no part in that killing," he said. "Just tell me that, and I shall be satisfied."

Anton Mercator stepped forward quickly, took him by both shoulders, and looked directly into his eyes with that penetrating gaze that Renwick had learnt was not quite like anyone else's gaze.

"Renwick. In the pursuit of what I—and my poor wisdom may be no better than a wiser man's folly—of what I consider to be the one fundamental law of this world—Justice—I have defied the laws of men, risked my honour and my liberty. I have dared to hold the scales; to weigh certain affairs of this world and find them wanting. But life—be it that of the meanest man, the foulest sinner against every code humanity has devised—life is sacred. I would not dare to take from any fellow creature that gift which cannot be restored. Not I."

"Then—"

"You, who knew me, doubted."

Renwick took the offered hand.

"Forgive me," he said, with the warmth of a man releasing a great weight. "I should have known. But this has shaken me badly. I can't look at a murdered man with the professional calm of Bingham and Pryde."

"It was the work of an enemy, Renwick. There are people working at this moment to build a false case, link by link—to prove that the robber, the incendiary, the iconoclast is also a murderer. I have need of all my friends tonight."

He ran his fingers through his black hair in a gesture that was, for once, almost weary. The lamp caught the ring as his hand moved, and the stone gleamed with its characteristic cold fire.

"This is a coward's blow of a kind I had not anticipated," he said. "But I believe my resources are equal to it."

"You know who did it?"

"If Scotland Yard or any of the other forces currently in the field do not arrest the wrong man in the next few hours, I have reason to believe that very shortly after the world hears I am a murderer, it will learn that I am not. Can you be ready to come with me from five o'clock this morning, at whatever hour I call?"

Renwick stared at him.

"Yes."

"Then to bed, copy-hunter. You are still my friend. That is all I came to know. For that alone I came like a thief in the night. *Au revoir.*"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"V-E-N-G-E-N-C-E"

At half past seven on the morning following M. Laurent's visit, the Count de Grammont opened the door of 59b Bedford Court Mansions to find the eccentric old art expert on his step. M. Laurent had brought his partner with him: a tall, heavily bearded man with a vaguely Slavic look about him who said very little and observed a great deal. Behind them came two others—one an alert-eyed, clean-shaven man in a tweed suit, the other a younger man carrying a small brown bag. These two, M. Laurent explained, would begin the inventory whenever the Count was ready.

De Grammont, who found something in the eye of the bearded partner that he could not quite account for, showed them into the dining room with its massive old oak furniture, lit a cigarette, and took up his usual position on the hearthrug with his hands clasped behind him.

"The Greuze," said Dr. Falco, indicating a painting to the group.

The Count turned to look.

Click. Click.

He was handcuffed.

With an animal scream of rage he spun on Falco. The vein throbbed on his temple; his eyes were quite wild. He tried to speak and produced only a slight froth.

"Sit down in that chair," said Dr. Falco.

"Release me immediately! What is this? What—"

"Sit down."

De Grammont ground his teeth. The vein looked as though it might burst. He dropped into the chair, trembling with a fury that had nowhere to go.

"You-will-answer for-this."

"My friend," said Falco, turning to the young man with the bag, "this gentleman"—nodding at the man in the tweed suit—"would like to hear who you are, and for what reason you visited Moorgate Street the evening before last."

"I am Lawrence Marsden," said the young man, "and two evenings ago, much against my wishes but to prevent Cawley exposing the state of my finances to my father, I was compelled to leave with him, as security against a debt of fifty pounds, a Turkish yataghan worth considerably more."

"Stop. When I came to Bart's to see you that night, what did I tell you?"

"That Cawley had been murdered with my yataghan."

"And what else?"

"You said the crime had the look of someone experienced, because the killer had worn gloves. You told me you had identified one of the victim's most significant creditors as a notorious French criminal—André Vasseur—"

The Count went perfectly white. The throbbing forehead was damp. His eyes fixed on Dr. Falco with an expression that had moved past hatred into something rawer.

"By what means?" the doctor asked Marsden, quietly.

"By certain facial peculiarities."

"Rule 85."

"And particularly by a vein in his left temple, visible only when he was roused to anger. You had secured, by a trick—"

"Article Six."

"An impression of his thumb from the ink on the cheque. This you had compared with records in your possession."

"Unnecessary, but correct procedure."

"You had also retrieved from the grate of his study a quantity of ash, some scraps of torn leather that were bloodstained, and various other fragments. These we spent the night examining and cataloguing. Among the ash was a boot-button—also bloodstained."

"What remained to be found?"

"A pair of boots."

"I go to find them."

Dr. Falco left the room. De Grammont tracked him with his eyes until he was gone. No one spoke until the brown old doctor returned, carrying a pair of glace kid boots.

He set them on the table beside the bag and pointed a long finger at a gap in one row of buttons.

"Scotland Yard can complete the set, André," he said, with the grim satisfaction of a man collecting the last piece of a proof he has been assembling for thirty-six hours. "In this bag is the account of how you came to Moorgate Street, how you knocked at Garston's door and were admitted. I don't know what you had originally intended, but the yataghan, left on his table by Mr. Marsden, was convenient. You then began to collect the

letters and papers that concerned you. You tore from Garston's private account book the page carrying your entry. Then tore out others, to confuse matters. You had begun on the letter files when someone let himself in at the front with a key. File G, André. You had just started on file G. One of the torn pages was G. That told me you were a G as well—or something close to it. With what you took from the safe and the stolen correspondence, you went down the back stairs to Copthall Avenue. By considerable good fortune, and only moderate skill, I found your trail. By greater skill I trapped you."

The prisoner, whose handsome face had now settled into an ashen stillness, whose eyes were fixed in a stare of combined horror and hatred, spoke at last: slowly, clearly, with an effort at composure.

"This is nonsense. You are taunting me. I want to know who you are. You are not Laurent. You are some sort of spy."

Dr. Falco removed a grey wig and a pair of thick spectacles, and seemed, by some relaxation of the muscles of the face, to simply dissolve—leaving in his place a heavy-eyed man with stained skin, thinning hair, and a quality of stillness so complete that the room seemed to reorganise itself around him.

De Grammont stepped back. And back. And back. Until the heavy oak chair stopped him. There, like a fortification whose structure has been silently and entirely removed, he seemed to simply give way.

"The good God," he whispered. "It is *Victor Margaud*."

"André Vasseur—Chevalier d'Oysan—Comte de Grammont," said the famous criminologist. "Paris has a prior claim, but London's is now stronger. And since I intend to recover my cheque from your wallet before we part, I shall hand you over to London."

Vasseur forced a smile onto his lips. It cost him something.

"It is finished, Victor," he said, the affected manner dropping away, replaced by a flat Parisian accent. "I am glad it was you and not some routine man who took me. Well—one has had a short life and an interesting one. You know, Victor, that being the son of an aristocrat has always been my particular misfortune. Such refined tastes, and such a gift for cards. You remember the little house near the old fortifications? But the inevitable run of bad luck came, as it always does. One question." His eyes moved to the bearded Russian-looking man, and something close to fear entered them again. "Why do you hunt me down?"

The black beard and moustache were removed in a single movement. Lawrence Marsden stared.

"Mr. Marsden," said the man who had been wearing them, "you know me innocent of at least one of the crimes attributed to me. I am Anton Mercator."

Marsden stood quite still for a long moment. He looked from the face of the most notorious man in Europe to that of his companion in the tweed suit, whom he knew to be H. T. Renwick of *The Gleaner*. Then he extended his hand and took Mercator's.

"You ask," said Mercator to Vasseur, and his voice had an edge in it that had not been there before, "why we have hunted

you. I will tell you. First, in the interest of justice. Second, because you imputed your crime to *me*."

"What! To you? No—never!"

Victor Margaud's heavy eyelids rose slightly.

"Spell vengeance."

Vasseur blinked. Then: "V-e-n-g-e-a-n-c-e."

"My friends," said Margaud, reaching for the wide-brimmed hat of Dr. Falco, "I came very close to ruining this, my greatest case, by a single stupid error. I have an early call to make. Continue your packing in my absence. I shall return shortly."

* * *

Cassian Krane, in Park Lane, was just rising when his man brought up a card:

Detective Chief Inspector Bingham

C.I.D., New Scotland Yard

Krane, who had slept badly and looked it, told his man to send the inspector up immediately. There came in instead a tall, black-bearded figure wearing blue-tinted spectacles, a worn raincoat, and a somewhat battered silk hat. The short drive from Bedford Court Mansions had been sufficient for Victor Margaud, secure from observation behind the drawn blinds of Mercator's car, to shift his personality entirely: distinct from Dr. Falco, nothing like M. Laurent.

"Who are you?" said Krane, changing colour and pulling his dressing gown tighter. "Who the devil are you?"

"Ssh. I am Inspector Bingham—in disguise. You will forgive me if, even here, I continue to maintain the character. You place yourself within reach of the law, my friend. You lay yourself open to the suspicion of murder."

Cassian Krane swallowed noisily. His face had gone a dingy colour; his eyes had acquired a fixed quality.

"Here, upon this card, write the words: Vengeance is mine."

Krane rose unsteadily. His hands moved as though feeling for something to hold.

"I swear—"

"Write."

Krane wrote, shakily: *"Vengeance is mine."*

"No 'a'!" cried Margaud, with a triumph that he did not attempt to contain. "No 'a'! Of all the stupid pigs, I am he—for I had not credited you with the nerve. But I had forgotten you had once lived rough, in your South African days. Yes? I did not think you had the courage to write—even wobbly—those lying words in the presence of the dead Garston. Why did you do it, you foolish fellow? The yataghan was already in the desk. That Vasseur is a fury when the blood is on him, when the great vein throbs. And you saw the blank paper. Or you feared—you, the mighty Cassian—that suspicion might fall on you? Yes, perhaps a little of that? But principally you hoped it would drive the police to Mercator, and that he would hang. You would rather the real killer—who murdered your own partner, mind you—went free, if

Mercator could be blackened for it. You threw sand in the eyes of justice. Well. You have influence. You will use it to clear yourself from any personal difficulty. That is acceptable. But first you will write, in a few words, how all this stands. That, or I have people outside. Very good—you will write."

* * *

At about the hour when morning readers were absorbing the news that Anton Mercator was connected to a violent death in Moorgate Street, a van drew up at New Scotland Yard and two overall-clad men dragged a heavy packing case into the building. They said it contained curiosities from Bedford Court Mansions, consigned to Detective Chief Inspector Bingham.

Half an hour later, when the case had been opened, out glared a bound and gagged man—on whose left temple a dark blue vein pulsed and throbbed.

In the case with him: detailed evidence proving this was the murderer of Garston. His dossier. His measurements. His fingerprints. His boots. A number of sealed containers holding scraps of stained leather. A number holding ash. All neatly labelled. A written confession, signed "Cassian Krane," admitting authorship of the words "Vengeance is mine." And finally, the following note:

"DEAR INSPECTOR BINGHAM,—

"I enclose herewith André Vasseur, the man who murdered Paul Garston, together with evidence sufficient to secure a conviction and completely to exculpate myself from any connection with the crime. I claim no personal credit for any of this. We are both indebted to M. Victor Margaud, who has not only surpassed his own remarkable records in the conduct of this case, but who was kind enough to assist in conveying the results of his labours to your office. We both regretted our inability to deliver them in person.

"ANTON MERCATOR."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

AN OFFICIAL CALL

The Home Secretary sat before the red-leather expanse of his writing table at Wrenfield Old Place. Papers of considerable political importance were distributed around it with the careless confidence of a man who knows exactly where everything is. To Mr. Walter Wenlock, politics was a pursuit second in its fascinations only to the cultivation of rare orchids, which ranked in his finely ordered mind equal with the collecting of early printed works and illuminated manuscripts, and the practice of photography—a hobby to which he devoted real attention.

He surveyed, briefly, the loaded shelves of his Circular Study: the bronze head of Cicero on the great table, the morocco and parchment spines behind it, the busts above the belles-lettres. Then he sighed, picked up a bundle of letters, laid it down again, and pressed the bell.

"I will see Inspector Bingham."

Almost immediately there entered a large, fresh-complexioned man of modest bearing—a man, Mr. Wenlock decided after one acute glance, who, once he saw his duty clearly, would pursue it through any obstacle, but who sometimes experienced difficulty in that initial step.

"Sit down, inspector," said the politician pleasantly. "You would like to see the communications I have received from this man Mercator?"

Bingham sat on the edge of the large leather chair and nodded.

Mr. Wenlock took up the bundle of letters.

"This," he said, passing one across, "I received on the twenty-eighth of last month."

Bingham bent towards the shaded lamp and read a neat hand on a plain correspondence card:

"Anton Mercator begs to present his compliments to His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department and to request the honour of a private interview, which he begs to assure the right honourable gentleman would be mutually advantageous. The words 'Safe conduct.—W.B.', together with a time and place, in the personal column of *The Times*, he will accept as a sufficient guarantee of the right honourable gentleman's intentions."

"This," continued Mr. Wenlock, "reached me on the seventh of this month":

"Anton Mercator begs to present his compliments to His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department and to urge upon him the absolute necessity of an immediate interview. He would respectfully assure the right honourable gentleman that high issues are at stake."

"And finally, I received this yesterday":

"Anton Mercator begs to present his compliments to His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department and to inform the right honourable gentleman that he having failed to appoint a time of meeting, Anton Mercator is forced by circumstances to make his own appointment, and will venture to present himself at Wrenfield Old Place on the evening of the fourteenth, between the hours of eight and nine."

Mr. Wenlock leant back, turning his chair slightly towards the detective.

"My information is," he said, in his finely modulated voice, "that you are personally familiar with the appearance of this man"—Bingham nodded—"but that no one else we can readily call upon is in a position to identify him. Now, apart from the fact that I have reason to fear he may attempt to see me here by means I have not sanctioned, this case is rapidly assuming a political significance." He made his characteristic pause. "I am advised that the case has acquired international dimensions at the highest level. The Foreign Secretary anticipates pressure from certain quarters regarding the advisability of bringing in additional resources—beyond our own services—to apprehend him. Were that to happen, the matter would need to pass to the Secret

Service, and I have reasons of a personal nature for which I would greatly prefer that it did not."

Inspector Bingham shifted in his chair.

"Excuse me, sir, but the Secret Service couldn't do more than we're doing."

"I grant you that entirely," replied the Home Secretary with his pleasant smile. "But in the event referred to I should have no choice. Far from wanting another service involved, I would very much regret it—for family reasons."

"Ah," said the inspector. "I was just coming to that side of the matter, sir."

Mr. Wenlock regarded the detective with a new quality of attention.

"You have my full attention, inspector."

"Well, sir." Bingham was visibly uncomfortable. "There's nothing to be gained by going around it. I know, and you know, that Lady Beatrice Ashford—your niece, sir—and her American friend Miss Zoe Hollister are acquainted with Anton Mercator."

Mr. Wenlock scrutinised Bingham carefully. There was considerably more to this man than first appeared.

"Is this regrettable fact widely known?" he asked, somewhat coolly.

"No, sir. But if the case went to the Secret Service it might become so."

"You are suggesting, inspector, that the discretion of our political agents is not to be entirely relied upon?"

"No, sir. But your private information could hardly be withheld from them as it has been withheld from us."

Even the politician's trained composure was not proof against that. He started. Inspector Bingham was, after all, a man to be taken seriously. A silence fell, and the Home Secretary broke it.

"Your frankness is appreciated, Inspector Bingham."

The other bowed with some awkwardness.

"I think you are proposing a bargain. You are offering me discretion in exchange for my confidence—and in the hope that anything I can tell you will render the involvement of the Fund unnecessary."

"Whatever you tell me, sir, goes no further. Not to one other living person. Better confide in me than in a political agent. And you can't have anything more incriminating than this."

He placed a card on the table:

"TO LADY MARY ASHFORD. I shall always be indebted to you and to Miss Hollister, but I can assure you of Sir Richard's safety. ANTON MERCATOR."

"No one has seen that but myself," continued the detective. "I have chosen not to act on it. But anything you can add will help me to protect the people concerned—which is what I'm after."

Mr. Wenlock's expression had changed when the card appeared. His decision, however, came quickly. He opened a drawer.

"Here," he said, passing a sheet of paper to the inspector, "is the plan of international co-operation which—I will return frankness for frankness—the growing significance of the case has made expedient. It was drawn up by the Foreign Secretary. It ensures secrecy and dispatch and leaves no obvious opening for Mercator."

His manner had sharpened. The book collector was eclipsed by the statesman.

Bingham read the document carefully and returned it.

"Thank you, sir. And what else?"

Mr. Wenlock allowed himself a brief smile.

"You are aware that, owing to the family complications I have mentioned, I have engaged Mr. Ben Darling privately?"

Bingham nodded.

"He has secured letters that implicate Mr. Renwick of *The Gleaner*; Sir Richard Carrick; Miss Zoe Hollister; and—you know the worst—my niece again." The inspector drew a long, careful breath. "Next to Victor Margaud, who is also known to be an associate," Bingham said, "Darling is the most capable private investigator I know. Though in fairness to us, sir, a police officer cannot do what Darling can do."

"I grant it entirely. Now, having given you my confidence, I rely upon you to work with me rather than against me."

"You have my word, sir. May I have those letters?"

Mr. Wenlock hesitated.

"Surely keeping them from the official record is inconsistent with your duty?"

"What about the card in my pocket, sir? That alone is sufficient if I chose to make a case. No; I give you my word that no other eye shall see them."

The Home Secretary shrugged with the expressiveness of a man who has run out of better options, and placed the bundle of letters in Bingham's hands.

"I rely upon you to keep certain names clear of this."

"They shall never be mentioned in connection with it. You've taken the only course that could guarantee that, sir. May I see the photographs?"

This request achieved something that very little managed: it visibly surprised Mr. Wenlock. He stared at the detective.

"I am glad to have a man of your quality in my camp, Inspector Bingham," he said. "You are evidently aware that Darling undertook systematic observation photography of persons known to Miss Hollister and to Lady Beatrice. Of several hundred photographs, only one negative proved interesting. I enlarged the print myself." He opened a drawer. "This gentleman was photographed in the act of bowing to Lady Beatrice and Miss Hollister at the corner of Bond Street."

Bingham looked at the photograph: a strikingly handsome dark man with curling hair and remarkable eyes, in the act of raising his hat.

"That's Anton Mercator," said the inspector simply.

"So I thought. So I thought!"

"May I take it?"

"I think not, inspector. You know the man." And with a slight coolness he returned the enlargement to the table. Bingham accepted this with one of his awkward bows.

"Regarding your security tonight, sir. Six of my men are posted around the house. Nobody can approach without being seen."

The Home Secretary glanced at his watch with a smile.

"A quarter to nine. He has fifteen minutes to make good his announcement. I do not fear interruption."

Bingham bowed again and was escorted out. Mr. Wenlock exhaled, took up his Petronius, and withdrew through the silent glass doors into the conservatory—a close, warm smell of tropical plants coming to meet him like an old acquaintance—and settled into a cushioned cane chair with the book and a shaded lamp. Reading there among his orchids was his particular private pleasure.

A few minutes later:

"Am I nowhere immune from interruption?" he murmured—then looked up, and smiled.

Lady Beatrice's face appeared through the foliage.

"Vickers was afraid to interrupt you in your cell, uncle. But Inspector Bingham is asking for you again and seems rather agitated."

"But I saw him fifteen minutes ago." He looked at his watch; it was just past nine. Then, remembering Mercator's boastful card: "He has not dared to attempt it! Unless—could it be an arrest? Send the inspector through here, Mary."

Lady Beatrice withdrew with a small puzzled frown, and almost immediately heavy footsteps sounded in the library, and Chief Inspector Bingham—pushing past the footman—burst into the conservatory. His face was flushed and his eyes were bright with something that was not entirely pleasure.

"We've been deceived, sir!" he cried. "We've been thoroughly deceived!"

Mr. Wenlock raised a white hand.

"My dear inspector, be calm, I beg you. Sit down and explain the matter."

Bingham sat, but the words would not be stayed.

"He's done it again! He's been and gone, sir! I think I know what he was after and I need your help. I know Ben Darling got hold of evidence we couldn't—but a C.I.D. man can't spend a week making himself agreeable to Lady Beatrice Ashford's maid—"

"But others are apparently better placed to invest that amount of time in my maid, I suppose?"

The interruption startled Mr. Wenlock out of his composure and silenced the detective instantly. Lady Beatrice stood in the doorway of the conservatory.

"I am sorry to appear as an eavesdropper," she continued. "But I had not actually left the study. Zoe is here with me too." The bright head of Zoe Hollister appeared over her friend's shoulder. "We are sorry to have overheard Mr. Bingham's remarks, but I think we have heard too much not to ask for more. Has someone been investigating my maid?"

Bingham glanced at Mr. Wenlock and read an appeal in the eyes behind the gold-rimmed glasses. He squared his shoulders with something admirably direct about it—and told a straightforward lie.

"One of the Pinkerton men working for Mr. Hollister tried to obtain certain letters through your maid. But there's not a scrap of evidence to hand, so he must have failed."

"Evidence of what?" said Zoe Hollister sharply.

Mr. Wenlock tapped his fingers on the chair arm.

"Of your friendship, and Lady Beatrice's, with Anton Mercator," replied the inspector.

Lady Beatrice went pale; her eyes widened. But Zoe Hollister laughed with open delight.

"Anton Mercator has never done a dishonourable thing," she said. "If we knew him we'd be proud of it. Come on, Mary. Mr. Wenlock, I'm nearly ashamed of you. You're almost as bad as Pa!"

They withdrew. Mr. Wenlock released a long breath.

"Thank you, inspector. Lady Beatrice would never understand that I only sought to protect her from compromising herself. I am glad the letters are in responsible hands."

"But they're not!" cried Bingham, leaping to his feet.

Gruffness had entered his voice, which the other attributed to agitation.

"How so?"

Mr. Wenlock's face acquired an expression of genuine bewilderment.

"Because I never had them. Because I have never had a single document in evidence. Because I have spent the last thirty minutes tied up in a tool shed in a turnip field. And because the man who walked through my patrol thirty minutes ago and came in here and recovered whatever incriminating evidence you had—was *Anton Mercator*."

It was a verbal thunderbolt. Mr. Wenlock sat with his eyes on the detective's face and said nothing. Now he looked more carefully. The voice had already struck him as subtly different; now he saw that the real Bingham's eyes were considerably lighter than those of his recent visitor; that the face was heavier, rounder. It was almost incredible, but not quite. He had seen great actors on stage and understood something of what complete transformation required.

"He has had months to study me," said the detective tersely. "I was at the Golden Tiger in the village. I'd been over the ground in daylight. I sent my men ahead to post themselves, and just as I turned the corner into the High Street a large car overtook me. Two men had me secured with a jiu-jitsu hold before I could react. They gagged and tied me inside, all the while apologising with what seemed like genuine regret and expressing the hope that they weren't causing unnecessary discomfort. They drove me to a shed and left me. At five minutes to nine one of them came back and freed my hands sufficiently for me to undo the rest myself. Here I am. Where is Anton Mercator?"

The Right Honourable Walter Wenlock became the man of action. He checked his watch.

"Twenty-five minutes since he left the house. But he may not have taken the road immediately."

He rang the bell.

"Vickers—the car, immediately! This way, inspector!"

He moved through the Circular Study, Bingham behind him. At the door he paused and turned back.

He bent over the writing table, looking for the enlargement of Mercator's photograph.

Mercator had not taken it with him, nor had he been back to the room.

But it was gone.

"Rome divided," he said quietly, to himself. Then aloud:
"This way, inspector!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

BLACKMOOR

Not a sound disturbed the silence of the tower room save the distant breeze through the coppice below and the intermittent creak of a loose shutter on its hinges.

Mr. Wenlock's eye was at the telescope lens, sweeping the moonlit landscape: the Downs rolling away to north, east, and west in long pale billows; to the south a wooded country, and in the south-east the Channel, a flat silver floor meeting the blue arch of sky at the horizon. Roads showed as white chalk lines through the grassland; farmsteads as small pieces on a vast board.

"If he has made for Eastbourne we have lost him," muttered the Home Secretary. "If for Newhaven we may not be too late. But there is a possibility—ah! Yes. They are making for Tunbridge Wells, perhaps for London. Quick, inspector! Don't move the telescope. On the straight road by the Norman church tower. Is that the car?"

Bingham applied his eye to the glass, acquired the line, and made out a long, low shape moving insect-like along a chalk thread.

"Looks about right, sir. We should take the risk."

"This way, inspector! Down the stairs!"

Bingham took the tower stairs at a pace their construction did not particularly encourage, making better time where the

light from a window showed the steps clearly. At the bottom Mr. Wenlock was already at the car.

"If that is his vehicle," the Home Secretary said, as they moved, "it isn't a powerful one. Probably hired for the occasion."

They came out through the hall and passed Lady Beatrice—who turned away with an odd expression—and Zoe Hollister. Zoe's face was flushed and her eyes were bright, though she lowered them as the two men ran by.

The chauffeur was ready. Mr. Wenlock, hatless, stepped onto the running board with the agility of a much younger man. Bingham followed with the caution of someone who has given the matter thought.

A man in a blue serge suit touched the inspector's arm.

"What shall we do, sir?"

"Wait here."

The car pulled away.

"Left! Left!" directed Mr. Wenlock, and they swung sharply round the curve and into the lane bordering the gardens of Wrenfield Old Place.

"Right!"

They straightened onto a chalky white road.

"Left! Straight ahead! The church! Open her out!"

Something dormant in the character of His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department had surfaced above its usual polish. The eyes behind the gold-rimmed glasses were hard and bright; the fine nostrils moved with the particular

pleasure of pursuit; the long neck was strung to a taut attention that had nothing whatsoever to do with orchids or early printed books.

"Let her go!" he shouted, his silver hair streaming.

"Through Church Lane!"

"It's a terrible road, sir!"

"Damn the road!" said the Right Honourable Walter Wenlock.

The car went sideways through an arch of hedges that seemed to flinch aside from its passage, two tyres briefly in the air, and came out onto the downland road with a momentum that rather than diminishing appeared to be gaining conviction.

"He delayed for something!" shouted Wenlock above the wind.

"We shall catch him at Blackmoor Farm!"

Bingham—wedged solidly against the front window and gripping whatever presented itself—thought of the photograph, and understood why Wenlock was certain of the delay.

The Norman church tower came up and went by: eight hundred years of patience mocking the urgency of the Speed Age. The road swept into a great bowl and the car went down it at a speed that produced in Bingham a sensation he had not experienced since, in a moment of professional weakness, he had allowed himself to be placed upon a fairground ride. The bottom arrived; the climb began; and presently, over the brow, Mr. Wenlock rose unsteadily beside the chauffeur and peered ahead.

"There they are! We shall overtake them before the farm!"

Bingham stood and looked forward. The grey car was clearly visible now, and even at the distance he could judge its pace. Capture was a question of minutes.

Unless it was the wrong car.

Closer. Closer. The fugitives topped a slope and against the sky a figure stood upright in the car—a large man, arms raised and elbows out, looking back in exactly the posture that Bingham had adopted on the same road minutes ago.

"Look at his hat!" cried Bingham. "Why, it might be me!"

"It might!" shouted Mr. Wenlock. "But it isn't! It is Anton Mercator!"

A wood dipped to the roadside and its shadows consumed the grey car; an interval of suspended breath, and those same shadows took Bingham's party; and then out of the dark the road ahead showed clear.

At the gate of the old farm yard stood the grey car.

Empty.

"Pull up!" cried Mr. Wenlock, and was in the road before the car had fully stopped.

Bingham dropped heavily behind him and caught his arm.

"One moment, sir."

His voice was entirely composed. This was his ground. A suspect had to be taken, the circumstances were difficult, and strategy was required.

"I agree," said Mr. Wenlock, containing himself with a visible effort.

"You take charge of the grey car, sir. That's your post. Here—take my revolver. Station yourself in the lane and see nobody makes for the vehicle. You, Coombe"—to the chauffeur—"know this farm at all?"

"I do, sir—used to come here as a boy."

"Back entrance to the main building?"

"Down behind that barn."

"Take this and go round there. When you reach it, whistle once. Hold your position until you hear my whistle from inside or I come through to join you. If he's not in the main building we do the outhouses. But his exit is covered all the time by Mr. Wenlock—understood?"

"Understood!"

"Good. Off you go, sir. Quickly."

Mr. Wenlock went at a run towards his appointed position, and the chauffeur dissolved into the shadow of the barn. Bingham, torch in hand, walked up to the doorless entrance of the abandoned farm and waited.

Complete silence, except for the wind in the coppice and the ancient shutter going about its business.

An owl called once; Bingham was alert in a moment. It was a sound with a history. Was it a feathered owl? No further sound confirmed or denied it.

Then the chauffeur's whistle came—faintly, with a slight unsteadiness in it that was entirely understandable given the circumstances.

Bingham pressed the torch and stepped into the bare room beyond: walls with the paper coming away in strips, a grate full of rubbish, a battered bucket, the floor littered and gapped between planks. A cupboard: empty cans and bottles. Nothing else.

Next room: nothing. The third: a big kitchen, empty. The fourth: a paved scullery, where Coombe appeared at the back door holding his spanner.

"Upstairs," said Bingham.

The staircase contributed its own considerable voice to the proceedings. On the landing: four closed doors.

Bingham paused and listened.

The owl again.

He directed the torch at the door to the immediate right of the stairhead and tried the handle. Locked. He moved to the next without hesitation. It opened on a bare room with half the ceiling following the slope of the roof down to the window. In the corner beyond the window another door was partly concealed by the alcove.

He crossed to it and threw it open.

Then events moved quickly.

Someone shot into the room behind him with a crash that shook the floor. *Bang!* A key turned in a lock.

Bingham spun around and found the chauffeur struggling to his feet and pressing his head with one hand.

The detective made no outcry and did not waste energy on the locked door. He stood very still and listened.

Footsteps receding rapidly down the stairs.

"One of the other rooms," said Bingham. "I told you to watch them."

He was angry, but functioning.

"Window," he said. "Too far to drop. We need to break the door. Try the keyhole—is the key still in the lock?"

Coombe began a vigorous assault on the door panel with the spanner. The wood was old but resistant. Then a crack appeared and Bingham's boot completed the business, shattering the panel. Coombe put his hand through the gap, found the key, turned it.

At that moment from the lane below: *thud, thud, thud.*

"That's the car!" cried Bingham. "Coombe—is the key there?"

"Yes—got it!" The door opened.

Bingham went down the stairs at speed, through the rooms, into the yard.

"Mr. Wenlock! Mr. Wenlock!"

Only the coppice and the shutter answered.

They ran to where they had left Wenlock on guard over the grey car. No sign of him. No evidence of struggle. From somewhere down the road the sound of the engine was fading.

"*He's been taken!*" Bingham started towards Mr. Wenlock's own car at the edge of the coppice. "In you get! He's gone back the way we came—I can't make out why they took the worse car, but we can run it down in five minutes!"

"Thank heaven for that," said Bingham, as for the second time that evening he found himself on the running board of a car in motion across moonlit Sussex, in pursuit of the most elusive

man who had ever confounded the Criminal Investigation Department.

The thought of being demoted for allowing Anton Mercator to abduct the Home Secretary from under his personal supervision was not a comfortable one. Even the descent into the great bowl of the Downs failed to displace it.

Then:

"There they are—and making straight for Wrenfield!" cried the chauffeur.

Bingham stood up unsteadily on the running board and there was the grey car climbing the hill ahead. He strained for a sight of the occupants. One man was visible. Only one. As they closed the distance, the suspicion formed and hardened: the car appeared to contain only its driver.

Closer still. The moonlight was ample. The driver's silver hair flowed over his shoulders as he bent forward over the wheel.

It was the Right Honourable Walter Wenlock.

"What in the name of heaven does it mean?" cried Bingham.

"Mr. Wenlock! *Mr. Wenlock!* Hoy!"

But Mr. Wenlock, immovable at the wheel, drove steadily on.

"What shall I do, sir?" asked Coombe in an awed voice.

"Pass him and block the road."

And so, on a moonlit Sussex road in the small hours, there was enacted what was possibly its strangest scene: Mr. Wenlock in a hired car being overtaken and cut off by his own limousine, which pulled across the road ahead and stopped.

For a moment the Home Secretary seemed to consider whether the verge offered a route around. But Coombe ran out to meet him with outstretched arms and the word "Stop!" delivered with considerable conviction.

Mr. Wenlock stopped, and looked at the man who came towards him with an expression of real amazement.

"You?" he said.

"Who else, sir?" said Bingham, irritably. "What are you doing? Where is Anton Mercator?"

"What!" said the Home Secretary, stepping down from the car. "You have lost him?"

"Lost him? I never had him."

"But," said Mr. Wenlock, in his most carefully measured voice, "did you not return to where I was standing at the grey car, and report that you had them secured in an upper room? Did I not myself hear the sound of them attempting to break down the door? And did you not then tell me that your numbers being insufficient to hold them alone, the most expedient course was for me to take the hired car back to Wrenfield for your reserve men, whilst you and Coombe held the position inside?"

"Go on," said Bingham, in the tone of a man who already knows what comes next.

"You see," continued the politician with a certain triumph, "the situation as I find it is due to no irregularity in my own conduct. You then told me that your car had somehow been tampered with. Hearing you behind me just now, I naturally assumed that the prisoners had overpowered you and were pursuing me."

"I see," said Bingham, removing his hat and applying a hand to his head.

"Finally," said Mr. Wenlock, with restored dignity, "you gave me this note for your sergeant Pruett." He handed over an envelope.

Bingham tore it open and directed his torch. He read it aloud, though in the excellent moonlight no artificial light was needed:

"Anton Mercator begs to present his compliments to His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department, and to thank him for the privilege of a private interview. Whilst regretting the subterfuge which the right honourable gentleman's attitude made necessary, he trusts it is justified by its results, and begs respectfully to repeat his assurance that no one in whom the right honourable gentleman has any interest shall be compromised, now or at any future time."

"You see, sir," said Bingham, in a tone from which all remaining animation had quietly departed, "that wasn't the real Inspector Bingham who spoke to you at the farm gate. By this time, sir, you ought to know who that was. That was Anton Mercator."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

YELLOW CIGARETTES

In our pursuit of the extraordinary being around whom so many mysteries accumulated, the affairs of Sir Richard Carrick have been somewhat neglected. They were now, thanks to Mr. Wenlock's elusive visitor, running smoothly.

To learn just how smoothly, we need only present ourselves at a certain social occasion.

"These military weddings are so romantic," said Mrs. Krane.

"And so beastly stuffy," replied her husband, mopping his forehead with the characteristic silk handkerchief.

"Doesn't Dick look well?" murmured Lady Marchwood, following the soldierly figure of the bridegroom with appreciative eyes.

Lord Marchwood shouldered his way through the crowd at the door.

"I say, Sheila, where's Zoe?"

"She was here a moment ago," said Cassian Krane, rolling his eyes about in search of the missing one.

"I mean to say, her father is asking—"

"What! Has Mr. Hollister turned up after all?" exclaimed Lady Marchwood, and looked quickly towards the door.

Through the crowd came a large, red-faced man, and behind him the spare figure of John Jacob Hollister.

"Hallo," said Krane, "here's Inspector Bingham from Scotland Yard." He fingered his tie-pin reflexively and counted his cufflinks. "What's up?"

The shrewd, kindly eyes of the C.I.D. man were scanning the packed rooms over the heads of the crowd—keenly, methodically. With a brief nod he passed the group and pressed on.

Mr. Hollister halted.

"What's the trouble, Hollister?" inquired Krane. "Thief here or something?"

"Worse," drawled the other. "Anton Mercator's here."

"Oh Lord," said Krane, and quietly moved his rings to a trouser pocket. "Let's go before anything happens."

"He's not here for a hold-up," replied Hollister. "That's not his style at a wedding. We don't know what he's doing, but he's here, all right."

"How do you know?" asked a brother officer of Carrick's who had joined them.

Mr. Hollister produced a cigarette case from his tail pocket and held up, between finger and thumb, the stub of a yellow cigarette.

"We're on his trail at last. He leaves these things everywhere—same as a moulting bird drops feathers. This one was in the tray of a cab. The driver dropped his fare right here."

He returned the stub to the case and pushed on after Bingham. As his spare figure disappeared from view, Renwick entered the room and was immediately claimed by Krane.

"Renwick! What's the latest? Is it war?"

"Nothing official when I left," replied the pressman, "but we're expecting something at any moment. Mr. Wenlock and Lord

Ashford have just been called to the Palace. I passed them leaving as I came in."

Krane seized the journalist's lapel with the urgency of a man who has been waiting to ask this question.

"What does that mean?"

"It means that within the hour Europe may be in crisis. Carrick is on duty this evening, so there'll be no honeymoon. Everything is in the air. I have two reporters watching; and if the Baron Sturm leaves the conference at the Palace and goes home, there may be no war. If he goes to Victoria Station—it's declared."

A young woman in pince-nez, tapping her front teeth with a pencil as she scanned the room, sighted Renwick.

"Oh, there you are! I was despairing of finding anyone who knew anything. You always know everything."

Renwick bowed with irony. She represented one of the oldest families in Warwickshire and the Fashionable Intelligence of the smartest morning paper in London.

"Sir Richard's best man," she began.

"Didn't you hear?" broke in Lord Marchwood. "Frightful nuisance—inconsiderate of Roxborough, really, couldn't he have found another messenger?—but Linfield had to go."

"I know all that," the lady said impatiently. "But who was the distinguished man who took Maurice's place?"

The Honourable Maurice Linfield, who was to have served as best man, had received instructions an hour before the ceremony to proceed immediately to a capital whose government was

currently in the most delicate possible relation with Britain's. Renwick would have given a great deal to see the dispatch he carried.

"No idea," said Marchwood. "Most extraordinary thing. Friend of Carrick's, turned up at the last minute and vanished the moment the ceremony was over. Never known anything like it."

"But he came here afterwards! Several people saw him in this house. You don't mean to tell me Dick Carrick didn't tell anyone who his best man was?"

"I was not present for the ceremony," said Renwick, "so I cannot help you."

"It's quite preposterous," the lady announced. "I have never heard of such a thing."

"What was this gentleman like?" came a quiet voice.

The eyes of the group turned together. Chief Inspector Bingham had joined them.

The lady of the Fashionable Intelligence appraised the large plain-clothed man with some uncertainty. He was outside her usual experience, but there was a quiet authority about him that called for a reply.

"He was the most handsome man I have ever seen," she said simply.

"Thank you," said Bingham, with even greater economy, and turned on his heel.

He approached a footman who, on closer inspection, had the air of a man doing an impersonation of a footman.

"You are certain that Miss Hollister and the man I described actually entered this house?"

"They were together in the small anteroom by the statue, sir."

"And Miss Hollister came out?"

"Yes, sir."

"But not the man?"

"No, sir."

Inspector Bingham made his way to the anteroom indicated. It was a small space: a divan, two chairs, a low table. Empty. A faint, very particular perfume in the air—Turkish tobacco, and something else, aromatic, that he had smelled only in this context.

In a small bronze ash-tray on the table lay a cigarette end of a dark yellow colour.

* * *

At approximately the same moment that Chief Inspector Bingham was acclimatising himself to the fact that Anton Mercator had just acted as best man at the wedding of the only daughter of the Marquess of Ashford, Mr. Thomas Renwick had the same extraordinary fact brought home to him rather more directly.

For in the wide publicity of Eccleston Square, observed by a considerable number of curious passers-by, Zoe Hollister stood on the pavement shaking hands with the master of audacity himself.

Renwick joined them at a near run.

"This is the height of indiscretion," he said, glancing around rapidly. "You compromise others—"

Anton Mercator stopped him with a quiet smile.

"Have I ever compromised another?"

"At this rate you cannot avoid it. Bingham is inside. What brings you here?"

"In the absence of the Honourable Maurice Linfield, I served as Carrick's best man."

Renwick stared.

"But you are not—"

"A Christian? My beliefs, Renwick, do not preclude attendance at a wedding ceremony. One day I may explain this to you more fully."

"You must have been recognised!"

"Who knows Anton Mercator?"

"At least four people currently in that house."

"Possibly. But none of them was present at the ceremony; and I can assure you I did not linger afterwards."

"You must go. You've been traced—"

"Never fear; I'm going. But, Renwick, take this envelope. It is the last story I have to offer *The Gleaner*, but it is the largest of all. Good-bye."

"Do you mean you're leaving England?"

Renwick's voice carried something in it that had not been there earlier in their acquaintance. Anton Mercator heard it, and his own voice changed when he replied.

"We may not meet again; I cannot say."

He placed his hands on Renwick's shoulders in the characteristic gesture, and looked into his eyes with the look that had, across many months, communicated to the journalist something very like what it now communicated: that behind all the theatre and the audacity and the impossible escapes, there was a person there who had found this friendship worth having.

"Good-bye," said Anton Mercator, and held the other's hand in both of his for a moment.

He turned to Zoe Hollister, who, very pale, was watching the house behind them.

"Good-bye again."

A cab was waiting. Anton Mercator lit one of his yellow cigarettes, stepped in, and was gone. Renwick did not catch his directions to the driver. Zoe Hollister said something brief and went quickly back into the house.

Before Renwick had collected his thoughts, a hand was placed firmly on his shoulder.

He started. Inspector Bingham stood beside him.

"Who was in that cab?" Bingham rapped.

Renwick understood that the moment he had long anticipated had arrived. He was caught. Mercator had finally gone a step too far, and he, Renwick, would pay for it.

"Why do you ask me in that tone?"

"Mr. Renwick," said the detective, with a grimness that was entirely genuine, "I have been watching you for a long time. You may not be aware that but for my own decision you would have been arrested months ago. I am long past the stage where sensational

arrests appeal to me. I am in the business of managing scandals, not illuminating them. You are a well-known man and it would break you if I charged you with complicity. But I have responsibilities too, and I warn you—if you choose your words carefully now instead of telling me the truth, I will have you at Marlborough Street in ten minutes.”

There was no misreading the blue eyes, which had set to something hard and certain. On Renwick’s next words rested his professional life.

“Anton Mercator,” he said.

“I knew it. Where has he gone?”

“I have no idea.”

“Don’t take chances, sir. I am very tired of protecting people who know this man. If you give me your word on that I’ll accept it.”

“I give you my word. I didn’t hear his directions.”

“Good. There are other questions I could ask, but I know you’d refuse to answer, and then I’d have no alternative but to act. So I won’t ask them. Good-day.”

“Good-day, Inspector. And thank you.”

Bingham nodded briefly and walked to the nearest waiting cab.

“What was the number of the cab that left just now?”

“LH-00896, sir. But not far. He told a mate of mine he’d be back in seven minutes.”

“Did you hear his destination?”

“No, sir. But the boy will know.”

The boy was found and applied to.

"Buckingham Palace, sir," the boy said promptly.

Bingham's expression changed quality.

"The gentleman I mean is tall, very dark, clean-shaven,
black hair—"

"Smoked yellow cigarettes, sir? Yes, that's the one.
Buckingham Palace."

"And he was admitted?"

"I saw him go through the gate, sir."

Chief Inspector Bingham stepped into the next available cab
with a face set in determined lines.

"Buckingham Palace," he said.

* * *

Meanwhile, Detective Sergeant Pryde, following the yellow
cigarette trail backwards while his superior followed it forward,
made his way to a cab rank at the top of Finchley Road.

He showed a photograph to the rank attendant. It was the
print from Darling's unique negative—the only copy the Home
Secretary had authorised. Or had intended to authorise.

"Does this person often take cabs from this rank?"

The man surveyed it with due consideration.

"Mr. Tarleton, that is, guv'nor. Yes, regular."

Pryde, who was a practical man and not a theorist, showed
his card.

"His address?"

"Further down on this side. Can't think of the number exactly, sir, but I can show you the house."

"Come on. Walk behind me, and whistle when I pass it."

He set off briskly along Finchley Road. More than halfway down, as he came abreast of a gate set in a high wall, a whistle came from behind him.

"70A," he said to himself. "Right."

He felt the particular pleasure of a pursuit that has arrived at its destination. Bingham's efforts at the Palace were probably going to come to nothing—but Mercator would return to his base sooner or later, and when he did, Pryde would be there. He thought of the months of fruitless effort, the false trails and missed connections; of the final simplicity of the yellow cigarettes; and felt, with the professional vanity that is entirely forgivable in a good detective, that this moment was earned.

He stood for a moment loading his pipe, within sight of No. 70A, reviewing his plan. He patted his breast pocket where the warrant resided and made up his mind. Bingham's subtler methods had produced fiascos before now. The direct approach had its merits.

He walked to the gate, opened it, crossed the neat little lawn, and was at the door of 70A looking for a bell when it opened quietly. The man who had opened it was dark-clothed, contained, with the particular composure of someone for whom silence is a professional habit.

"I have important business with Mr. Tarleton," said Pryde, and handed the man a card bearing the name "Mr. Pelman."

"He is not at home, but expected," said the man, in careful English. "Will Mr. Pelman wait?"

"Yes, if it won't be long."

He was shown to a small, quietly furnished room off the hall and left alone. Pryde looked around with professional appreciation. Simple but carefully chosen. The house was very silent.

He went to the door and looked into the hall. Narrow, with heavy drapery making it darker than it need be. Ideal for his purpose. He would wait; the moment Tarleton came in he would move fast, get the handcuffs on, then open the front door and whistle for the man he'd left outside.

He moved the handcuffs to a more accessible pocket and buttoned his coat.

How quiet the house was.

He checked his watch. Nearly five minutes. Then, from outside, the crunch of a step on the gravel path.

Pryde braced himself.

A key turned smoothly in the lock. The door opened.

With something of the concentrated force of a man who has been waiting for a specific moment and has decided it has arrived, Detective Sergeant Pryde launched himself at his man.

What his man had that Pryde had not reckoned for was the reflex of someone for whom physical danger is not a new experience. He stepped aside with an economy that made Pryde's

charge look effortful; and Pryde reintroduced himself to the front door with his head.

It was a credit to his construction that he remained functional. He did the right thing by instinct: hands up, grabbed the man round the neck from behind as the other leapt on him, rose to his knees despite the swimming world, got to his feet. The man choked, struck, and hung helpless.

At the exact necessary moment, Pryde dropped his right hand to the man's right foot, bent, turned—and his man went down hard.

"That's the Cornish grip," panted Pryde, sitting on his captive with full conviction.

Click. Click.

The handcuffed man pushed himself to a sitting position.

"You goddamned son of a—" He stopped. Sat white-faced and manacled, looking up.

"Jumping Coombe," he whispered. "It's Pryde."

"Royce!" cried Pryde. "What the—"

"Same to you," snarled the Agency man. "Call yourself a detective. You'd do better as a coal merchant."

When an exchange of mutual insults had run its natural course and something approaching conversation became possible, the two men compared notes in the silent hall.

"Where did you get the key?" demanded Pryde.

"Estate agent," said Royce. "I work on the theory that I'm after a clever man, not a herd of livestock."

They searched the house with revolvers out. Nothing. No living thing anywhere. One room was unfurnished—off the hall, on

a lower level, with a stone floor and plastered walls, an unglazed window onto the garden, a deep recess opposite the door holding only shadows.

"It's a complete setup," said Mr. Aloys X. Royce. "And we are it."

"You mean to say he's leaving all this furniture—"

"Hired," said Royce. "Hired. I knew that before I came."

Detective Sergeant Pryde raised a careful hand to his head, and sat down on the cushioned hall-seat with the particular expression of a man who is reconsidering a number of recent decisions.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

AT THE PALACE—AND LATER

How self-centred is man, and how darkly do his own immediate concerns overshadow the larger events of his time. Crisis might be declared at any hour; the placards said so; the newsboys said so; the clubs said so. War was in the air. But Inspector Bingham, riding to Buckingham Palace, found his soul quite impervious to the martial atmosphere, for the question he was turning over was a personal one: should he, or should he not, arrest Anton Mercator?

He reviewed the whole bewildering case in the space of a few minutes: from the first night in Park Lane to this improbable afternoon, the trail winding through the drawing rooms and offices of London, through France, through Sussex, through the imagination of the best criminal mind in Europe—all the way to a wedding ceremony where the groom's best man was the man all of them had been looking for.

It was Mercator's boast that no door was closed to him. Bingham had heard that boast many times. Perhaps it was no idle one. *Who was Anton Mercator?* He had asked himself this question many months ago and could still not answer it. He asked it again now.

The cab stopped before the Palace gates.

Bingham was not unknown to those who sat in high places. He had commanded the security operation for a protracted royal tour some years earlier—a service that had earned him the rare

privilege of requesting audience at any hour. He had never previously exercised it. He exercised it now.

Five minutes later he found himself in an antechamber. Voices reached him from beyond a draped curtain—enough voices to indicate a gathering of some consequence. The smell of cigar smoke was in the air.

He tried, and failed, not to hear.

"We had all along desired that amicable relations be maintained in this matter, Baron."

That was the Marquess of Ashford. Bingham knew his voice well.

"It has not appeared so from your attitude."

Someone else. Probably Baron Sturm.

"Your admirable patriotism, Baron, has led you to misconstrue as affronts what were intended as expressions of our continued goodwill."

Only one man in England had that particular quality of polished delivery. The Right Honourable Walter Wenlock.

"I have misconstrued nothing. My instructions have been explicit."

"Fortunately, no further occasion will arise for you to carry them out."

Whose was that voice? Bingham strained. He could not be certain.

"A messenger, Mr. Maurice Linfield, left for my capital this morning—"

"Captain Searles has been instructed to intercept him. The dispatch will not be delivered."

Bingham stood very still. That voice—he knew it. But from where?

Then the sound of someone's hands placed on someone's shoulders.

"Baron Sturm, I hold a most sacred trust: the peace of nations. No one shall rob me of it. Believe me, your great master is already preparing a conciliatory communication—"

The musical voice. The vibrant, forceful note. Bingham closed his eyes.

"In short, Baron"—and now Bingham stopped trying not to hear, because the voice was unmistakeable and the words were extraordinary—"there is a power above governments, above flags, above declarations: the power of capital in motion. To pursue a war a nation requires credit, and the confidence of the markets that carry its debt. I have sufficient influence within those markets, through my organisation's presence in sufficient of the right places, that my refusal to support a transaction carries weight. I have declined my consent to the arrangement that would have financed the enterprise against this country. Without those credit lines the project is not viable. The war died in the hour of its birth. I am glad of it, and I believe, Baron, that you are too."

A brief silence. Then the sound of handshaking—as the inspector divined from the manner of the murmur that followed—and

a number of people withdrew by another door in what sounded like, improbably, friendly conversation.

A hand drew the curtain aside.

"Come in, Bingham," said a genial voice.

Chief Inspector Bingham bowed very low and entered. The large room now contained only the gentleman who had admitted him, and the Right Honourable Walter Wenlock.

"How do you do, Inspector Bingham?" said the Home Secretary affably.

"Thank you, sir. Quite well."

"I think I know what brings you here. You have been following—"

"Anton Mercator. Yes, sir."

"As I supposed. Well, Inspector, it will be expedient—altogether expedient—to keep that name entirely out of the press going forward. Furthermore, any warrant currently in existence must be cancelled. This is a matter of policy, and the necessary instructions will reach the Criminal Investigation Department. In short—the case is closed."

Chief Inspector Bingham looked rather dazed.

"No doubt this is a surprise to you. But do not let it be a disappointment. Your handling of the case throughout, the tact you have shown in protecting persons who might otherwise have found themselves very awkwardly placed, and the manner in which you have consistently limited the damage to those who deserved it—none of this has gone unnoticed. Your future is assured, Inspector."

The gentleman who had admitted Bingham had left the room almost immediately; now he returned, and fixed something to the detective's lapel.

"By way of apology for the case we are asking you to set aside," he said pleasantly.

What Bingham said or did at that moment he could never quite reconstruct afterwards. He had a faint memory of something about "Anton Mercator—"

"Ssh," Mr. Wenlock had replied. "There is no such person."

It was at the moment of his leave-taking that his eye was drawn to the large table by the window. A long tongue of smoke rose from an ash-tray among the other remains of the conference.

It came from the smouldering fragment of a yellow cigarette.

* * *

When Inspector Bingham had fully recovered his habitual composure and found himself in Piccadilly, the news had broken. Peace was on every placard. Peace was being shouted by every newsboy. *Gleaner* bills everywhere:

"PEACE—Official!"

Where all else had spoken of crisis, *The Gleaner* had spoken of resolution; and where the other papers had been half right, *The Gleaner's* account proved entirely accurate. The newspaper's coverage had been, as its readers had come to expect, inspired.

To what extent *The Gleaner* spoke truly, and to what extent its information had been placed with it by a person who knew what the outcome would be before it was announced, you are as well equipped to judge as anyone.

And unless some future opportunity should arise to continue this account, there is little more to tell of Anton Mercator. His work in England—officially, and as the holder of whatever the Damascus curtain had concealed—was, for the time, done.

* * *

This is at a certain pier-head, on a summer's afternoon, at a time when grey shapes moved across the horizon: a naval squadron, returning to home waters after thirty-six hours in a neighbour's sea. The squadron was coming back. It was peace expressed in the language of power.

Closer to shore, at no great distance from the pier, a white yacht lay under steam. A launch left her stern and headed for the pier steps.

In the lower gallery of the pier, shut off from the holiday crowd above, a tall man leaned on the wooden rail and looked out to sea. Beside him stood a girl in white—pale today, her usual colour absent, so that fashionable New York, which had its fixed idea of what Zoe Hollister looked like, might not immediately have known her.

"Though I have been wrong," he said slowly, "in much that I have done—even you will agree that I was right in this."

He gestured towards the diminishing shapes on the water.

"Even I?" said Zoe sharply.

"Even you. You above all have shown me my errors."

"You admit, then, that—"

"My methods have sometimes been wrong?"

"I didn't mean that exactly. But the means you have used have often been violent, even when the purpose was good. I don't believe a lasting change can be made that way."

He turned and looked at her.

"You may be right," he said. "And yet, even now, I see no other way."

Zoe pointed towards the horizon.

"That," he said, "was a problem of a different kind. Every government that wishes to pursue a war requires credit. The financing of modern conflict is not a matter for armies alone; it depends on markets, on the confidence of those who carry the debt. I had sufficient influence within enough of the right places that my refusal to participate in the arrangements designed to finance the aggression against this country made the project unviable. The crisis died in the hour of its birth. I cannot claim this is a better method than law. But in the absence of any law that reached this particular situation—it worked."

"You mean that you control the markets?"

"Not control. Influence. Where I am trusted I am listened to. Where I am not trusted I am, as you have witnessed, sometimes feared. The instrument is imperfect. The wielder is imperfect." A pause. "But it worked."

His eyes held something that had not been there in the earlier months of their acquaintance. Not regret exactly. Something between exhaustion and a clear, unhurried sadness.

"For this," he said quietly, "will be forgotten, I hope, all the errors; and forgiven, all the sins."

"I am quite sure of that," said Zoe, with an earnestness that she did not attempt to moderate. "But whatever you came to do—"

"I have not done. Only in part." He moved his hand, and the sun struck green from the ring. Zoe glanced at it with something very like unease. "Where I lived in London," he continued, in that characteristic way of his that answered questions she had not spoken, "there was a curtained recess. It held the emblem of the authority I have tried to exercise. My house is empty now. The emblem returns to the country where it was made."

"You are abandoning everything. Why?"

"Perhaps because the instrument is too heavy for the hand that holds it. Perhaps because I am only a man." A pause. "And lonely."

The launch touched the pier steps below them.

"You are the most loyal friend I have made," said Anton Mercator, "in England, in Europe, in the world. Good-bye."

Zoe was very pale.

"Do you mean—for always?"

"When you have said good-bye to me I have nothing else to stay for."

Zoe looked at him once and looked away. The colour came into her face, and a breeze from the sea drew her hair across it.

"But if I *won't* say good-bye?" she whispered.