REVIEWS FOR

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and the Spector Locked-Room Mysteries

CABARET MACABRE

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CABARET MACABRE

TOM MEAD

An Aries Book

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To the current locked-room masters:
Yukito Ayatsuji, Paul Halter, and Soji Shimada.
In memory of Seishi Yokomizo (1902-1981) and,
once again, John Dickson Carr (1906-1977).

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The quotation on page 70 is taken from "Backbone Flute" (1915) by Vladimir Mayakovsky.

The quotation on page 180 is taken from *A General View of the Law of Property* (1895) by James Andrew Strahan and James Sinclair Baxter.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Justice Sir Giles Drury, QC
Leonard Drury, his son
Ambrose Drury, his other son
Sylvester Monkton, his illegitimate son
Lady Elspeth Drury, his wife
Jeffrey Flack, her son from a previous marriage

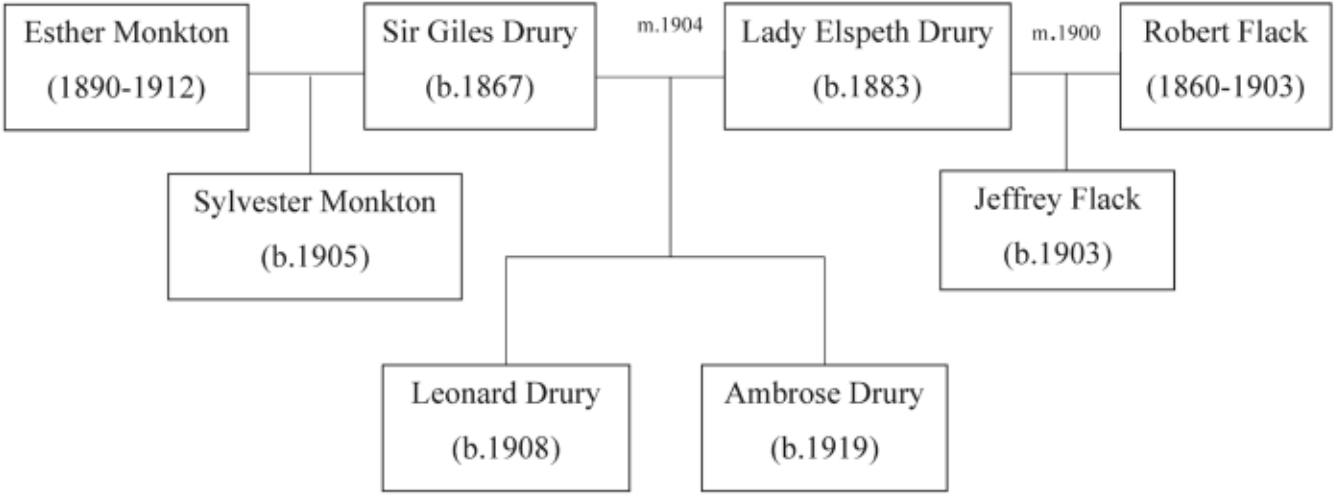
Peter Nightingale, Leonard's secretary
Ludo Quintrell-Webb, a revolutionary
Arthur Cosgrove, a civil servant
Horace Tapper, a film producer
Thomas Griffin, a hospital orderly
Dr. James Findler, a police mortician
Mrs. Runcible, a housekeeper
Becky, a housemaid
Alma, a cook
Dr. Jasper Moncrieff, an experimental psychiatrist
Byron Manderby, an explorer

Victor Silvius, a madman
Caroline Silvius, his sister

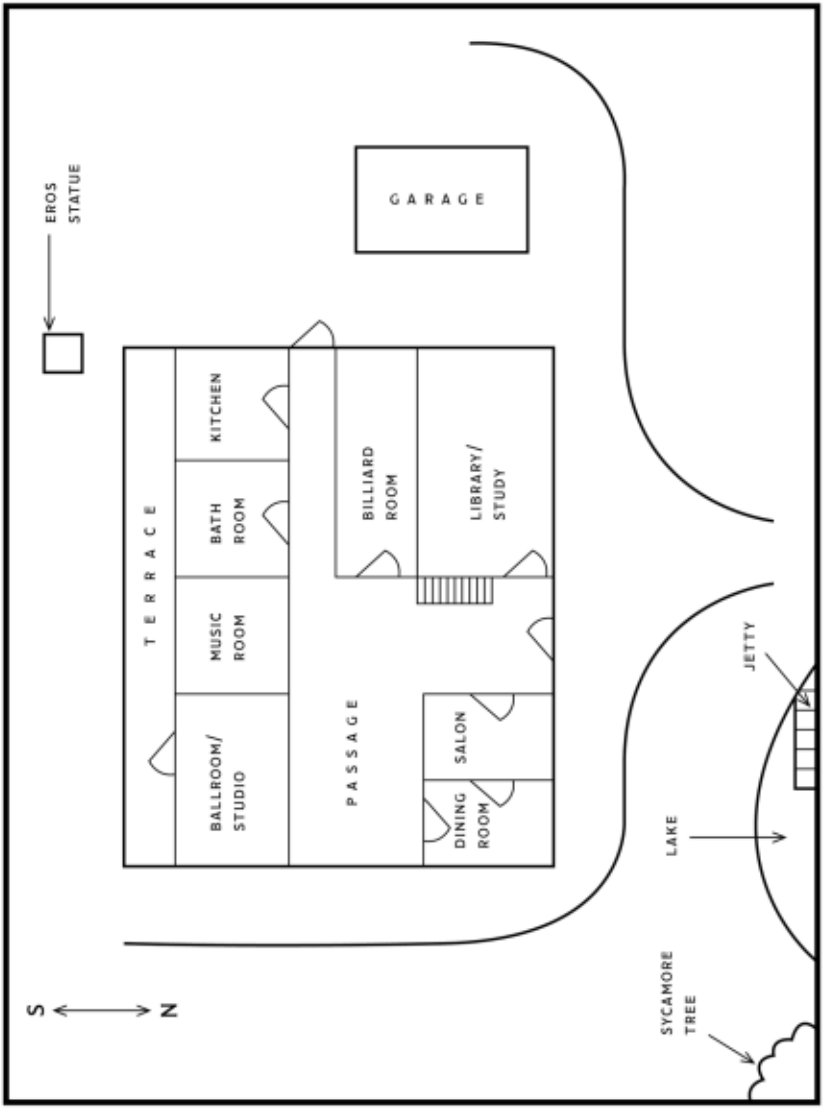
"The Edgemoor Strangler"
"The Ambergate Arsonist"

Inspector George Flint, of Scotland Yard
Sergeant Jerome Hook, his second
Joseph Spector, a professional trickster

DRURY FAMILY TREE



MARCHBANKS GROUND FLOOR



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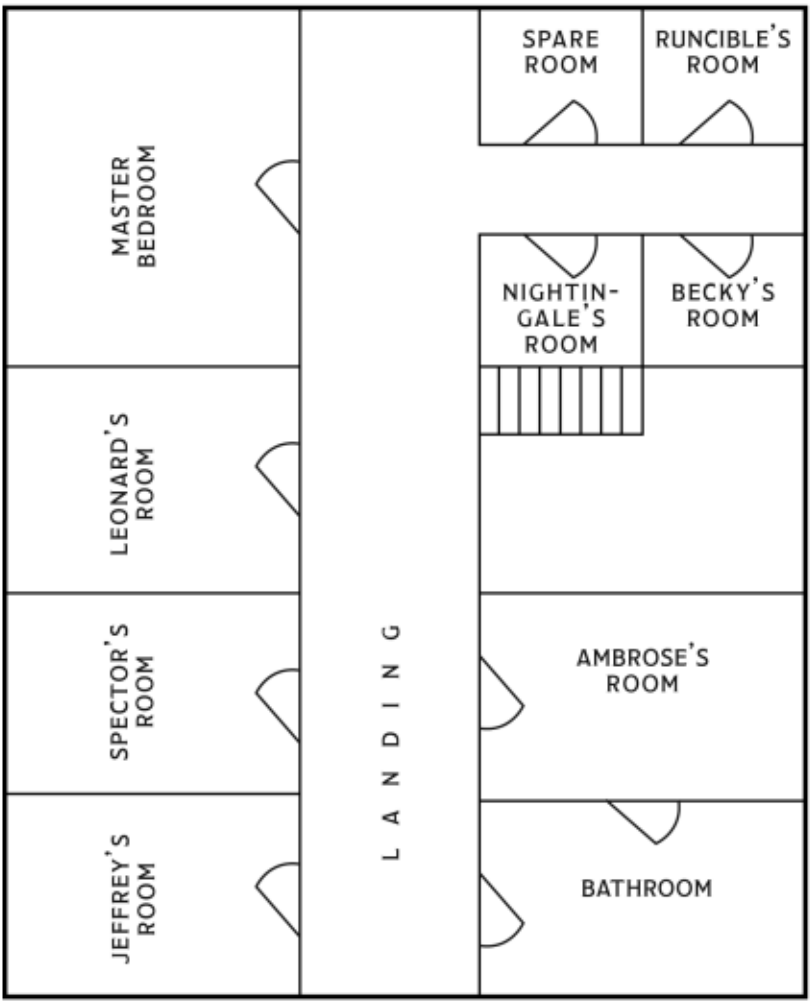

PART ONE

THE FACELESS MAN

December 13–15, 1938

He shall not live
To see the moon change.
—*The Revenger's Tragedy*, act 4, scene 2

Chapter One

THE STEAMER TRUNK

Tuesday, December 13, 1938

I.

The steamer trunk had leather handles, brass fittings, and a dark, hardboard shell. As such it was like any other steamer trunk. You might say its only notable feature was its location: washed ashore on Rotherhithe beach, where it lay looking soggy and pitiful alone on the pebbles in the chilly morning sun. Nine-year-old Fred Lindsay and his seven-year-old sister Enid were bickering and laughing as they crested the dune and got their first glimpse of it on the flats. Benny, their beloved Jack Russell, bounded over with his tongue flapping, and commenced an exhaustive investigation with his probing nostrils. But the children were cautious.

They glanced at one another and Enid, the braver of the two, made the first move. She skipped toward the trunk, her head brimming with fantasies of pirates' treasure. This was the sort of thing that happened to little girls like her, she thought. They found treasure and got whisked away on adventures.

As she drew closer, the stench rolled over her like the tide. It rooted her to the spot and made her gag. It smelt worse than anything the Thames had ever spewed up before.

"What? What's the matter?" said Fred. Then the stench hit him too.

Once they had got over the initial shock of it (Benny the Jack Russell was still frolicking around the trunk), the siblings decided they'd better try and crack it open. They didn't *want* to, not really, but they felt it their duty.

Careful to breathe through his mouth, Fred dropped to his haunches and examined the brass clasp. It was caked with clumpy sludge from the bottom of the river, but otherwise seemed to be in decent working order.

"Pass me that, would you?" he said, indicating a chipped bit of slate on the ground.

Enid brought it over to him; the slate was heavy, so she needed both hands. He took it from her and swung for the clasp. The edge of the slate struck with a thump. Fred swung again. This time, some of the dried mud came away like clay. One more swing, he thought, and they were in.

It actually took about six more swings, but finally, with an eerie sigh of escaping air, the buckle snapped and the trunk lid splayed open. It made Fred and Enid jump. Even Benny was

a bit suspicious. The three of them stood to examine what was inside.

Neither of the children screamed, though both wanted to. Eventually it was Enid, the brave one, who broke the silence.

"What have they done to his face?" she said.

II.

Inspector George Flint gazed out at the iron-grey surface of the Thames from beneath the brim of his slightly-too-large bowler hat (a gift from his wife, who often overestimated his dimensions) and sighed. He chewed his unlit pipe philosophically, then forced himself to look down at the mess inside the trunk.

Sergeant Jerome Hook, who was younger but steelier about such matters, hadn't taken his eyes off the tangle of limbs and torso.

He said, "Somebody didn't want us to identify him."

"Looks that way all right. Only reason I can think of for smashing his face into mush like that. But what I'm wondering about is his *hands*."

The body in the steamer trunk was male and had dark hair. As for distinguishing features, that was about it. The trunk had been in the water for at least a week. The body had the creamy, greenish tinge of old tapioca. It was mottled with mould and bruises.

"Hallo there," called a voice through the wintry river haze. The bulky outline of a greatcoated man with a doctor's bag came slowly into view.

"Dr. Findler," Flint said by way of greeting, "you're a sight for sore eyes."

"I might say the same of you," answered Findler through a yawn. "Why've you brought me to this godforsaken spot?"

"See for yourself."

Findler was a year or two younger than Flint, and it showed. He was clean-shaven and his face lacked Flint's ruddiness. Nonetheless, he was capable and well-versed in what he referred to as the "dark arts." He had built his life around death, and so neither life nor death held much terror for him. Findler was a strict Darwinian when it came to murder, with little sympathy for the victim who had failed to run fast enough, or picked a fight with the wrong man, or got in the way of a stray bullet. He was unmoved by the contents of the trunk, and peered at them in the way a window shopper might peer into Debenham & Freebody: with the measured curiosity and mild distaste of finding last season's suits still displayed behind the glass.

"What can you tell us about him?" said Flint.

"Nothing we haven't seen before. I'm tempted to call it a gangland killing. Quasi-professional. Except for one thing."

"Which is?" But Flint already knew the answer.

"His hands."

III.

Back at Scotland Yard, Flint shut himself in his Thameside office to read and reread the scant details he had scribbled in his notebook.

Today's discovery offered little scope for interpretation. Dark-haired male, aged between twenty-five and forty-five.

And what of the trunk itself? It was depressingly ordinary. The sort that might be purchased from any local shop. No travel badges or labels. Attempts to trace it would lead precisely nowhere.

But Flint kept coming back to the hands. If this were a gangland killing, and the victim known to the law, Scotland Yard would most likely already have his prints somewhere on file.

That's what troubled Flint. It made him wonder if maybe this wasn't a gangland killing at all.

The window frame rattled and he looked up from his papers to see spatters of rain on the glass. A fierce wind whipped against the side of the building. He briefly debated whether or not to light his pipe (chewing it unlit helped him to concentrate, though a puff of tobacco might stave off the chill) but was snapped from his reverie by a knock at the door.

"Come," he said, and Hook stepped inside.

"Sorry to disturb, sir," said the sergeant.

"It's all right, Hook. Any news?"

"No, sir."

It was a vain hope, but cases like the Rotherhithe trunk murder sometimes produced witnesses and informants. *Somebody* knew the dead man. He had come from *somewhere*.

"Well, what's it about, then?"

"Woman to see you, sir," said Hook. "Name is Miss Caroline Silvius."

"What does she want?"

"Won't talk to me I'm afraid, sir. Wants you and only you."

"Is it to do with the trunk business?"

"Don't know, sir."

Flint thought for a moment, finally decided to light up his pipe after all, then said, "All right. Bring her through. And brew some tea while you're at it."

IV.

"Inspector Flint?"

"That's right, how d'you do. Miss Caroline Silvius, is that correct?"

"Quite correct." Caroline Silvius's manner was polite but officious. She was a young, prim, schoolmarmish sort, dressed comfortably and frugally.

"Please come through. Sergeant Hook will bring you some tea in a moment."

He offered her the most comfortable chair. She sat in it willingly and seemed at once to lose some of the inhibition that had hung about her shoulders like Le Fanu's phantom monkey. She relaxed, the muscles in her narrow shoulders slackening.

"Hope you don't mind my barging in like this," she commenced. "Most out of the ordinary, I'm sure."

"Not at all," said Flint. "Now what's this about?"

Hook came in with a tray of tea, and Flint played mother.

"Well . . . it's to do with my brother."

Flint immediately pictured the contents of the steamer trunk. "Oh yes? And what's his name?"

"Victor."

"Victor, eh? What about him?"

"Well," she said, "I'm afraid somebody is trying to kill him."

Flint had just taken a mouthful of tea, and almost sputtered the whole lot across his desk. "Kill him?"

She scrutinised him, as though seeing him for the first time. "Can I trust you?"

"Of course," he answered, striking a match to ignite the tobacco in his pipe bowl.

She paused. "All right. It started some ten years ago, or thereabouts. I was only twelve. My brother was nineteen. He was—still *is*—an artist. He has a fiery, passionate soul, you see. He never was a fellow to do things by halves. So, when he fell in love with Gloria Crain, he fell very far indeed. He grew obsessed with her. Convinced that they would be married and live 'happily ever after.' The poor boy."

"So," Flint put in, "this Miss Crain didn't reciprocate his affections?" *Spurned romance from over a decade ago?* The inspector sighed inwardly. "Victor" was not the faceless man in the steamer trunk after all.

"Oh but she did. She was a year older than Victor, and secretary to an important fellow, a judge. Perhaps you know him—Sir Giles Drury?"

Flint nodded without comment. Everybody knew Sir Giles Drury. "Forgive me for being presumptuous—but may I take it their courtship did not end happily?"

Caroline Silvius cradled her teacup in her lap. "Indeed."

"She spurned him?"

Caroline gave a sharp, involuntary laugh. "I wish it were that simple. No, Inspector Flint. Gloria's love for my brother remained as strong as ever until the day she died."

Flint's moustache twitched a little. He waited for her to elaborate.

"Gloria died suddenly, ten years ago this Christmas. She was Sir Giles's private secretary, as I've said, and she had gone with him to his country retreat, a place called Marchbanks, to spend the festive season. The rest of the Drury clan was there too. Sir Giles is—as I'm sure you know—a gentleman ill-inclined to let a little thing like the Yuletide get in the way of his work. So he brought Gloria out there with him, and while the rest of the family was telling jokes and playing games, he and Gloria would be in his study, hard at work. She stayed with the family as their guest. And it was on Christmas night—after dinner . . ."

"Yes?"

"Gloria was taken ill. She was dead before dawn."

"How did she die?"

"Strychnine. A suicide, according to the official verdict."

Flint frowned. *Suicide by strychnine?*

"But there were certain *rumours*," Caroline continued. "They'd been fomenting for a while. Specifically, rumours that Sir Giles was unfaithful to his wife, Lady Elspeth. And when Gloria died, my brother lost all reason. He became obsessed with the notion that Gloria and Sir Giles had been having an affair, and that Sir Giles had killed her."

"What did *you* make of it all?" Flint inquired.

"I was just a girl. And though I loved Victor with all my heart, I think even then I knew that he'd come to grief. Men like Sir Giles Drury make powerful enemies. And poor Victor . . ." she spoke haltingly now, clouded by emotion. "Poor Victor never stood a chance."

"What happened?"

"Victor went mad. Really and truly mad. He attacked the judge. Waited outside his chambers and stabbed him. The judge survived, as you are no doubt aware. But there is nothing quite so momentous as the vengeance of a powerful man. Victor was taken and quietly committed, to avoid further scandal. Condemned as insane which, in a way, I suppose he was—though it was the judge that drove him to it. Gloria's death was hushed up and the whole mess was forgotten about. And my brother was left to rot. Our parents never spoke of him—they were embarrassed, and fearful Sir Giles would make life difficult for them. As far as they were concerned, Victor simply ceased to exist."

"Then what changed?" asked Flint.

She bowed her head. "Our parents died two months ago. As soon as I was able, I went to visit him. And my God, Inspector Flint, what a sight he was. Half-starved, with a beard down to here—a real Count of Monte Cristo. I scarcely recognised him at all. But he still had the same kind, loving eyes."

"And now you claim that somebody is trying to kill him," Flint prompted.

"It's the judge," she affirmed. "It has to be."

"But why? And how, for that matter?"

"Victor is an inmate at a private sanatorium owned and run by one Dr. Moncrieff. The doctor and the judge happen to be members of a curious drinking club known as 'The Tragedians.' Thick as thieves since their university days. Sir Giles pulled strings to ensure that Victor ended up at Moncrieff's clinic."

Flint's writing hand was getting tired. He let his pencil fall from between his fingers and clatter on the desk. He studied Caroline Silvius very carefully. This story of hers was fantastic, but he knew at least part of it to be true. Sir Giles Drury, the famous (and infamous) hanging judge, had indeed been attacked outside his chambers some years ago. Though Flint had been on the force at the time, he'd not been involved in the ensuing investigation. The incident briefly made headlines before being swiftly shunted in favour of more palatable fare. Another of the judge's chums pulling strings, no doubt. A fellow "Tragedian."

Flint had never heard of Gloria Crain. He would need to look into the fateful dinner party that had served as the backdrop to her untimely demise. And as for Dr. Moncrieff, he too was known to Flint. An "experimental psychiatrist" with a line in lobotomising promiscuous debutantes. That he and the judge were old friends did not come as a surprise.

But this Victor Silvius was an enigma.

"What makes you think Sir Giles wishes to hurt your brother?"

"There have been certain incidents. Naturally Moncrieff and the thugs he calls 'orderlies' have denied everything. But I've seen the truth for myself. They started with slivers of glass in his mashed potato. Oh Mr. Flint, they would have cut him to ribbons. I ask you, what's that if not attempted murder?"

"Very nasty," said Flint. His gaze twitched toward the window, which was now slick with sleet, dribbling down like a spent candle. "All due respect, Miss Silvius, but . . ." he chose his words carefully. "Can we be sure of the *veracity* of your brother's version of events?"

Her eyes narrowed then widened, as though she had been about to snap at him but thought better of it. "There's nothing wrong with my brother."

"No, no. Of course not."

"You don't believe me, do you? If you'll let me, I'll prove it to you."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Why, you must meet him and see for yourself."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," said Flint, fatuously shuffling a few papers, "not without reasonable grounds for an investigation . . ."

"Please," she said, her eyes gleaming in the lamplight. "There may be more than one life at stake."

Flint exhaled resignedly. "When did you have in mind?"

"As soon as possible."

"Next week, maybe?"

"All right. I'll telephone you this afternoon with the details."

Flint got up from the desk and went over to the window, where he stood gazing out contemplatively with his hands folded behind his back. He glanced back at the mound of papers awaiting his attention on the desk. The thankless pursuit of the faceless man in the steamer trunk.

"Very well," he said.

V.

Leonard Drury studied the fellow from the agency with an appraising eye. Well-dressed but not too well-dressed. Good posture. Handsome but, most importantly, not *too* handsome. Leonard tried to guess his age and put him in the early thirties, rather like himself.

The two men were in the study of Leonard's opulent London townhouse, which he liked to think of as an encapsulation of his boisterous personality. He lived there alone (at least in theory), and his long-suffering servants tolerated him with saintly stoicism because he paid them well. But there was also the little matter of his celebrity. Leonard had just emerged triumphant from a year treading the boards at London's Alhambra Theatre in *By Twilight, My Darling*, a theatrical tour de force that had afforded him a swift ascent to the upper echelons of the acting fraternity.

"Remind me of your name?"

"Nightingale, sir. Peter Nightingale."

"Ah yes—I have it here. Nightingale. Good name—sounds like a film star. All right Nightingale, let's say I offer you this post. When could you start?"

"As soon as you like, sir."

This was the correct answer.

"I see you were with Byron Manderby, gallivanting about the Congo and what have you. I can't promise you anything as exciting as that, you know. It'll mainly be answering letters, forging my autograph, et cetera."

"Oh, that's quite all right. You'll forgive my candour, but a chap does get tired of gallivanting eventually." Nightingale gave a wan smile and a flicker of his left eyebrow.

He would not look out of place in a Noël Coward play, Leonard thought. This was going to be interesting.

"You know, I've often wondered about that Byron Manderby. Must take an odd sort of fellow to climb mountains and frolic with natives and suchlike. You must tell me about him some time." There was an unpleasant smirk on Leonard's face. He was testing the applicant, seeing how easy it might be to make him talk.

"Perhaps, sir."

Leonard continued to study him carefully. And Nightingale, in turn, studied his prospective employer.

"All right," said Leonard, "I think I'm going to like you, Nightingale. I shall telephone the agency this afternoon. You may start in the morning. I shall expect you to take the attic room. Does that suit?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"And I presume you haven't much in the way of personal belongings?"

"Just a few clothes and trinkets, sir. Nothing to concern yourself with."

"I assure you, I wasn't concerned."

He was plainly a gentleman, though there was nonetheless a tang of foreignness to him. It was evident that he had been away from his motherland for some time, and was studiously reacquainting himself with its more refined customs. He smoked, but he did not smoke any tobacco that Leonard recognised. Not

even Turkish. When he extinguished one cigarette and swiftly lit another, Leonard noted the brand name on the packet. It was Sampoerna: "Dji Sam Soe." That was the scent that clung to him, that prickled in Leonard's nostrils.

"Everything seems in order," said Leonard, who really had no inkling whether everything was in order or not. "You've got the job." But further effusions were cut short by the jangling doorbell. "Ah. That'll be my brother. Let him in, would you, there's a good chap. Then you can see yourself out."

Peter Nightingale got obediently to his feet and loped for the study door.

Leonard watched him go, smoking thoughtfully. Young Ambrose (he was nineteen) had been oddly keen to procure an appointment with his brother for that evening. Evidently there was something he wanted to discuss.

"Who on earth was that who answered the door?" Ambrose demanded as soon as he set foot in the study.

He was trying to grow a beard, a drastic undertaking that took up most of his waking hours. He was an artist these days, and like his elder brother he knew it was important to look the part. And so the tufts of downy reddish hair plumed out from his chin like thin wisps of mist, and he dressed almost exclusively in haute couture kaftans with baggy, sultanesque trousers and a floppy straw hat. This look had worked wonders for him on the Continent, and he had travelled around the glorious capital cities of Europe making many impecunious bohemian friends along the way. Inevitably, he had drifted back to London when he ran out of spending money. Now he spent his days in

coffeehouses, thinking about things, and his nights in cocktail bars, *not* thinking about things.

Ambrose was briefly in thrall to Dada, which seemed primarily to entail the impish procuration of household appliances. But Duchamp had the market cornered, and Ambrose couldn't get a look in, so he had returned to his first love—painting. When he turned nineteen he entered a prolific period that produced what he considered to be his most challenging and mature work. Each was a mad blur of shocking colour: electric blues, salmon pinks, ice whites. But the lines were bold, black, and—ultimately—naive in their execution. *The Tulip Field* was, Ambrose himself laughingly admitted, a nightmare. *L'Oeuf* was an Oedipal confabulation best left undescribed. *Eve* depicted a tree with female genitalia and, instead of leaves, eyeballs dangling from stalks.

Occasionally he paid a visit to his mother and father, when his coffers were uncomfortably depleted. Sir Giles, who had initially shown enthusiasm for his youngest son's artistic endeavours, was chilled to the bone when he looked at them, and whenever they were brought up in conversation he hastily changed the subject.

"His name is Peter Nightingale. My new secretary. What did you think of him?"

Ambrose flung himself into the chair that Nightingale had occupied moments ago. "Bit stiff. More like a butler if you ask me."

"Well, you should have seen some of the other hopefuls. Abysmal. I don't know where that agency finds them. All frustrated actors, no doubt."

"No doubt. Anyway, were your ears burning? I've just been discussing you with a mutual friend."

"Really? Dare I ask for a name?"

"Horace Tapper."

"Horace! Good God, whatever were you doing with that old reprobate? Some party I wasn't invited to?"

"Oh no," Ambrose responded laughingly. "As a matter of fact, I went to see him out at Shepperton."

"Is that so?" Leonard was immediately suspicious. Horace Tapper was the producer who had been so dazzled by Leonard's charisma onstage that he had signed him up for a motion picture almost immediately. The thought of idiotic Ambrose meeting Horace without Leonard's advance knowledge was disquieting.

"Yes," Ambrose answered tartly, "it is so. Matter of fact, dear old Horace thinks I might have what it takes for a certain picture he's preparing."

Leonard guffawed. "Oh, is *that* all! Going to act, are you? Failed as a novelist and a painter, so you're going for the hat trick?"

But the smirk did not leave Ambrose's face. "Horace says I have presence. A unique charisma."

So this was why Ambrose had been so keen to stop by. To gloat. Well, Leonard would not take the bait. "Care for a spot of billiards?"

"If you dare," Ambrose grinned. "I've been practising."

Leonard led the way through to the billiard room and started setting up the game. Ambrose seized a cue and began to chalk up.

"Leonard?" Ambrose spoke his brother's name with a childlike upward inflection. Difficult questions afoot.

"What is it, squirt?"

"Do you think there's any chance Father might die soon?"

"Possibly. He *is* hellishly old. Why?"

"I've been thinking about things lately. I'm going to be twenty soon. I need to buy so many things, cars and suits and the like. I won't be able to do it with the pittance he's got me on at the moment."

"I thought you were going to be an actor?"

"I am! I am. But all the same, it's important to keep one's options open."

Leonard lined up a shot. "What makes you think dear Father's demise would leave you any better off? You won't get a penny. I'm the eldest; I'll get the lot. Murdering the old man won't change that."

"You're not the eldest," put in Ambrose.

"Sylvester, you mean? He doesn't count. He's a bastard, and thus even further down the pecking order than you."

There was a pleading expression in Ambrose's eyes. "You'll look after me, won't you?"

Leonard shrugged. "I might. If you make it worth my while. If I were you, I'd make a concerted effort to be entertaining."

Ambrose looked out the window sulkily. "I never said murder."

"What's that?"

"I never said anything about murdering father. I was merely wondering aloud what the odds are on him dying soon."

"Oh, spare me. I know full well what you meant. Cigarette?"

Ambrose took one from the gold case and leaned forward so his brother might light it. "Stranger things have happened, of course."

"Stranger than what?"

"Than old judges getting murdered."

"Well, don't get any funny ideas. If you were going to murder Father, I bet you'd make an awful hash of it and get caught immediately."

Ambrose eyed his brother slyly. "Ever so sure of yourself, aren't you, Leonard? You know, I went to tea with Mother yesterday, and she happened to let slip a piece of information that I found awfully interesting. Something that might wipe the smile from your face."

"Which was?"

"Father was out . . . having lunch with Struthers."

Leonard swallowed. "Struthers? What the hell does Father want with him?"

"Obvious, I should have thought. He's changing the will."

"Don't be ridiculous," snapped Leonard. But they both knew there was nothing ridiculous about it. Here was the *real* reason for Ambrose's house call. Desperate measures were called for. "There's no reason at all to suppose he's planning to change the will," Leonard said soothingly. "There could be any number of reasons for him to meet with his solicitor."

But he struggled to come up with any. "Do you know," he continued, with a theatrical yawn, "I'm suddenly very tired. I think I'm going to turn in. Early start in the morning, and all that."

"Yes, all right, I get the message," answered Ambrose, dropping his cue onto the table with a dour thump. "Besides, I got what I came for."

Leonard escorted his younger brother out, pausing only briefly in the corridor outside the study, where the curiously strong aroma of Sampoerna tobacco prickled noisomely in his nostrils.