

# **Gone Before Christmas**

**Charles Lenox**

**by Charles Finch, 1980–**

**Published: 2017**

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.



The two brothers stood motionless upon the top step of a fine London townhouse, each with arms crossed, assessing a correspondingly motionless pair of trees propped against a railing.

“The one on the left looks as if it has minutes of life left in it,” said Charles Lenox, finally.

“Then that ought to be yours. You always had a green thumb.”

That was his older brother, Sir Edmund Lenox, speaking. “That’s nonsense.”

“You did!”

“If there’s a strong wind all of its needles will fall off.”

“Anyway, the one on the right isn’t much better.”

“It’s much less dead.”

Edmund flung his arms open expansively. “Death is the great spiritual adventure toward which all living things must lean forward in hope and humility, in neither fear nor anger.”

“That may well be the case, but I still want the less-dead one.”

“Look here, though, that’s the one I want.”

The house on whose steps they were having this conversation was Charles’s. It stood in the little cobblestone street at the heart of London’s West End called Hampden Lane. It had not snowed so far in that December of 1877, though this morning it felt as if it were very near—a gray, wind-whipped day, each little shop across the way a small orange glow of comfort beckoning one inward. Neither brother wanted to extend the debate; when it was finished there would be a cup of tea waiting for them in Charles’s study, and already their noses and fingers were bitten with the cold.

“Listen,” Edmund reasoned, “the dying one will have a terrible time getting back to my house. It will die on the way. Here, with immediate attention, in your warm, nurturing—”

“Oh, blast you—fine,” said Charles irritably. He knew that his brother was correct on that point. Through the glass on either side of the front door he motioned toward Kirk, the house’s vast, dignified butler, who was standing just inside, enshrouded in an immense fur-lined overcoat. Kirk emerged in response, and Lenox said, “Please take this dying tree inside and put it in some water immediately. You ought to get Massey to help. It’s bound to be sticky.”

“The dying one, sir?”

Charles picked the tree on the left up by its trunk and thrust it toward Kirk. A cascade of needles fell.

Edmund, gracious in victory, tried not to smile. He motioned toward his carriage on the street below, and the driver came up the steps and hoisted the better of the two trees onto his shoulders, then transported it down and began to bind it to the four-wheeler’s back ledge with rope.

Two trees came each year from the grounds of Lenox House in Sussex, Sir Edmund’s house, and it was to Edmund’s credit that Charles received one at all. That was the other, unspoken element of his concession in the choice—but of course Charles had a daughter of five, Sophia, and to children of five Christmas trees may be significant in the extreme. Edmund’s two sons were much older, one a junior officer at sea aboard the LUCY, the other managing a coffee farm in Kenya.

“Well,” said Charles, sighing, “I hope it may last the next three days, anyhow.”

“Until Christmas morning.”

“Yes, then it can slink off to some corner and die.”

Edmund smiled. “What about that cup of tea, then?” he said, rubbing his hands together.

The two brothers looked alike, lean and thoughtful, though Charles had a short dark beard matching his hair, while Edmund was clean-shaven and carried a bit more heft in his shoulders. Edmund was a prominent member of Parliament, on a dashing break before the evening session at the House of Commons, just down Whitehall from Lenox's home.

Charles was a detective.

"All right," he said moodily, "fine. Tea."

"I wouldn't turn down a stack of toast, either."

"Tea, toast, the better of the trees, my left arm, why not take them all," said Charles, following Kirk and the footman named Massey inside, bearing tenderly between them the feeble Christmas tree of which he was now owner. "Let's find a place near the fire anyway."

"Capital idea," said Edmund. "I'm curious to hear about this disappearance in Charing Cross."

"Yes, it's an odd one."

Edmund frowned. "Is it true that he vanished without a trace, the poor chap?"

"Nobody vanishes without a trace."

Lieutenant Ernest Austen of the Grenadier Guards had, however; even Lenox would be forced to concede, come close.

The circumstances—the circumstances that had left Scotland Yard so baffled that they had agreed that he, a private detective, might be invited to consult upon the matter—were surpassingly simple.

They began with the Grenadiers.

This was one of the oldest regiments in Her Majesty's army; so old, indeed, that it took first precedent among all regiments, and therefore its colonel-in-chief was by tradition in fact Great Britain's monarch herself. (This occasionally led to the humorous sight of Queen Victoria, generally situated in careful stateliness beneath an elaborate hat, riding next to the extremely proper colonel of the regiment, together conducting an official review of the troops.) The Coldstream Guards were perhaps more aristocratic, the Welsh Guards more rakishly glamorous, but the Grenadiers considered themselves to outshine all competitors in both glory and grace.

They were billeted in the Wellington barracks in London. (Arthur Wellesley—later to become the Duke of Wellington, following his triumph at the Battle of Waterloo—had been a member of the Grens during the early part of his military career.)

In times of peace, the officers were allowed to rotate from thence to their homes at Christmas.

"Austen was bound for home, then?" Edmund asked.

Lenox nodded. "Via Charing Cross."

They were now in Lenox's book-lined library, which had a long row of windows overlooking the slender cobblestone street outside. Tea was just arriving, steam curling gently from the delft-blue pot in which it was brewing. Kirk, against all protocol, still wore his overcoat as he delivered the tray—but it was hard to blame him, on a day when the chill stayed in your flesh long after you had come inside,

and besides which when he was covered in pine needles, and would need to remove the coat carefully downstairs to avoid scattering them across the upstairs quarters.

“You look like a Russian general in that coat,” commented Charles.

Kirk was too noble to reply to this directly. “May I bring anything besides toast, sir?” he asked, setting down the tray.

“Lord, yes, everything,” said Edmund. “I’m famished. If there are preserves laid against the winter months I want to eat them down to nothing.”

“Feel free to treat my home as your own,” said Charles.

Kirk, whose limberness of intellect was perhaps not the foremost of his many excellent qualities, grimaced in consternation. Would sandwiches and gingerbread satisfy the request? Both brothers nodded; they would do very well; thanked him; he withdrew, grimace gone.

Charles, lifting his cup of tea and taking a very small sip, leaned back in his armchair and took up Edmund’s question. “To answer you—yes, he was returning to Suffolk. His father is a clergyman there. Independent means, from all reports.”

That was unsurprising; life in any of the six Guards regiments ran very dear. “Where in Suffolk?”

“The countryside just beyond Ipswich, Inspector Larchmont tells me—a small but substantial country estate. Mother dead, but two sisters still living there, keeping house for the father.”

“It was Inspector Larchmont who brought you aboard?”

“Yes.”

“Well then,” said Edmund, carefully drawing his own teacup to his lips and taking a small sip to mirror his brother’s, then emitting a contented sigh, “spin your tale.”

The facts were of a simplicity to please Charles Lenox’s mind. As a detective, he enjoyed puzzles that were clean and strange, uncomplicated except by one enormous complication. This was the sort of mystery he had read about as a boy—a missing ruby necklace, a gunshot wound in the temple of a marquis who had been quietly reading papers in his study.

But the vast majority of murders, of burglaries, of assaults, of bludgeonings, of thefts, were, in disappointing contrariety, messy, foolish, and obvious in both their motivation and actors. Generally, they involved love or money.

As it happened, however, Austen’s case *was* one of those simple, confounding ones Lenox liked so much.

The lieutenant had been dining in a small restaurant at Charing Cross called Olivetti’s. An Italian of the same name owned it, though he served standard British fare. The other three officers with whom Austen had been in the restaurant were all rotating home for the Christmas holiday as well. (Their names were Price, Curbishley, and Boothby. None was a suspect—thus far.) They had decided to split cab fare from the barracks to Charing Cross and then pass the time before their respective journeys with a meal together. According to Inspector Larchmont, the quartet had been friends, companions of the officers’ mess, Austen included.

Austen's had been the first train scheduled to leave, the 1:09 to Ipswich, but the others were due to depart soon thereafter, all within twenty or thirty minutes. They had therefore paid their bill at five minutes before the hour, then left the restaurant together and gone to the army cloakroom, which was a room behind lock and key near the ticketing agents, a place where army officers could stow their belongings while they waited for their trains. The four had left their bags there earlier.

The cloakroom had been empty when they returned. They'd retrieved their bags without any trouble and emerged again into the bustle of the station.

Standing outside the door together—in uniform—they had begun to say their goodbyes, when Austen had smacked his forehead. "Dash it all, I've forgotten my hat, haven't I. Give me a moment, chaps."

Then he had gone back in.

Charles described all of this, then sat back in his seat and took another sip of tea. In the silence, the fire crackled.

"And?" said Edmund.

"That's all. He hasn't been seen since."

Edmund whistled. "Goodness."

"Yes, very odd."

"And so what did you do?"

"I went to see the cloakroom for myself this morning."

He had arrived on the spot roughly twenty-four hours after Austen's disappearance. The gent from Scotland Yard who had met him there, Inspector Larchmont, was rather new to the force, recently promoted from a beat in the south end of London. He was a rough-and-ready kind of person, toweringly large, though in surprising contrast to his beefiness he had proved, in Lenox's scattered experiences with him in the eleven months since his promotion, quite sensitive to the emotional overtones of the men and women he interviewed and investigated.

He had a ruddy face; his hair was slicked back into a firm shellac, with what Lenox was absolutely positive from the scent was beef suet, a common unguent for the control of flyaway hair among the less refined classes. Scotland Yard, stolidly professional, generally whipped that sort of habit out of a fellow. Lenox rather liked that Larchmont had kept it, remaining true to himself.

They'd shaken hands. "And this is it, the infamous room?" Lenox asked Larchmont.

The cloakroom had been in the papers that morning, already the subject of a great deal of speculation. Charing Cross was hardly a private site, of course. The Grenadiers were also famous throughout the empire, which made Austen's disappearance attractive fodder for the press.

Larchmont nodded. "Yes, here it is. Preserved since yesterday as we found it. Which is not to say it hasn't been interfered with. Our people were thirty minutes in arriving."

Austen's three friends had gone back into the cloakroom in search of him after only a few moments, and found it empty—and also found, the reason for their alarm and the immediate involvement of the Yard and subsequently Lenox, a wide spray of blood against the wall.

"Blood!" said Edmund as Lenox recounted this.

“Yes.”

“Well? What then?”

Lenox and Larchmont had entered the cloakroom together, each touching their hat to a youthful, fat-cheeked bobby who was standing guard at its door. “Wilkinson,” said Larchmont in a commanding voice.

“Sir.”

They passed Wilkinson and went inside.

The cloakroom was a small, square chamber with benches ringing it on all sides, and hooks and cubbies lining the walls above these. The walls from floor to ceiling were of a highly polished dark wood, benches too. The room smelled of tobacco, and at the rear of the room was a very large sofa and a pair of armchairs with a small circular table between them, on it a stack of copies of the army’s own *Gazette*.

The most significant immediate fact that Lenox observed about the room was that there was no door other than the one through which they had entered.

No window either.

Lenox looked up. Larchmont followed his gaze, and, reading his thoughts, said, “Nothing above eye level.”

“He really did vanish, then,” Lenox had muttered.

“Nobody—”

“No, I know that, of course. I was being facetious.”

“Ah. Facetious. Noted.” Larchmont nodded stiffly. “No, this is the only possible egress.”

The inspector led Lenox behind the sofa and pointed to a grate low in the wall. It was about three feet across and two feet high. Larchmont himself would have had trouble wriggling down it.

“Where does it lead?” asked Lenox.

“Into the steam room. It’s a fairly straight shot, approximately ninety yards. From there you can go anywhere you please—it lets straight out into the street or into the station, two doors. Locked from the outside of course, but not the inside.”

Lenox knelt down and peered into the black depths of the tunnel. The panel that had been covering the grate was leaning against the wall next to it, a solid piece of oak pierced with even rows of holes, along with four heavy bolts that had evidently been keeping it in place.

“You found this panel removed?”

“Yes,” said Larchmont.

Lenox reached an exploratory hand inside—very warm to the touch, which made sense since it was so close to the steam room.

He pulled his hand out again, brushing the dust off of his jacket.

“What can you tell me about Austen?” he said.

Larchmont raised his eyebrows. “Ah. There we’re having something of a tricky time. A bit of a runaround from the Grenadiers. It seems that he was in intelligence. From what I can piece together, he had recently recruited a very valuable French agent here in London.”

That seemed a clearly consequential fact, and Lenox nodded.

He had reached his point in the story when he was interrupted by the sound of the front door. "That must be Jane and Sophia," he said, set down his teacup, and rose from his chair.

Charles's wife and child brought the cold inside with them, heavily wrapped themselves, carrying parcels and bags. Each embraced the two brothers, and each asked immediately if they could have something hot to drink (tea for Jane, cocoa for Sophia), filling the quiet room with a sudden liveliness.

They had been out shopping together in the arcades by Piccadilly—it was the twenty-second of December, not much time before Christmas—but had returned for Sophia's lunch.

She was five now, and abjured naps as childish; for his part Lenox could think of few more serious grown-up joys, but she was stubborn in her opinion. Nevertheless she regularly had a period of quiet rest after lunch, in which she lay wide awake and considered, who knew—life, the tears of the world, her toys—which her governess was very severely insistent still be called a nap. And this hour, too, was approaching.

"We've brought you a tree from the country, Sophia!" said Edmund. He was selling it very hard in advance, Charles noted. "A lovely green Christmas tree."

"Can we see it, Papa?" said Sophia, who was in Charles's lap.

"Well, I suppose. Brace yourself."

They trooped into the dining room. The tree was propped up in a steel bucket full of tepid water.

Lady Jane was silent for a moment and then said, "I don't recall founding an arboretum for terminally ill fir trees."

"It's a pine tree, which shows what you know," said Charles, though he wasn't sure why he was defending it.

Sophia looked thoughtful. "The presents will crush its branches, papa. But I do like it."

"It will look better with tinsel in it," he said, squeezing her.

As was the custom all across England, St. Nicholas left the Christmas presents at the Lenox house (many rather large, in their boxes, their tissue paper, their string) amidst the branches of the trees. If there were any that positively wouldn't fit they were placed beneath the tree—but that was considered poorish form.

Jane said, "I'm afraid she's right, these branches won't bear the weight of the presents."

"We can bind them in there with rope."

"We're not the Swiss Family Robinson."

"Not with that attitude!" said Charles.

"Our guests will think we've grown very economical."

Most of Lady Jane's mind was bent upon the supper she was preparing for the twenty-fourth, Christmas Eve. In general they spent this time of year in the country, but the special session of Parliament had kept Edmund in the city, a mercy, perhaps, since he was not long widowed, and still cut a lonely figure, at least to Charles; and both his sons were out of England.

A good many other gentlemen had been similarly detained in the city, and were either disgruntled at being kept from the country, or secretly delighted at being spared it.

Sophia came up to Edmund, who was as familiar to her as any piece of furniture in the house, and tugged at his hand. "What does Papa want for Christmas, Uncle Edmund? We couldn't decide at the shops. You're his brother."

"That is my privilege, it's true." She looked at Edmund blankly, and he twisted his mouth up in a simulation of deep thought. "When he was your age he wanted a pet rabbit. Now? Perhaps a pair of warm boots."

"I do like a pair of warm boots," said Lenox. "I should like a reindeer, too, so that I could ride about the city as blithely as St. Nick, you know, and never have to plan about the traffic in the streets."

Sophia smiled at that. "Only he can have a flying reindeer."

"You're quite correct, my darling, I was joking." He checked his watch. "Speaking of which—I'm for the Wellington barracks, if I have to navigate London traffic along the way. Care to come along, Edmund?"

"No, no, an afternoon session." He sighed.

Charles, who had spent five years—years of mixed frustration and joy, for he did love politics—in Parliament, well understood that sigh. "Come, you can drop me in a taxi anyhow."

"Yes, gladly."

They took their departure of Lady Jane and Sophia, Charles promising that he would see them later that afternoon, and taking one last sip of his tea, which he had brought into the dining room with him when they came to inspect the tree.

A footman stepped outside to hail them a cab and before long they were clambering inside it, thanking him.

"The India bill, again?" Lenox said to his brother, once they were situated.

"Oh, yes. Speeches of interminable length. Plates of mutton and roasted potatoes brought into the benches as sustenance. And at three in the morning still nothing resolved."

"At least you have a living Christmas tree to return home to," Charles pointed out, as the cab clunked and jounced over the cobblestones.

"Shall we trade? You have the tree, I'll take the case."

"No, I'm quite eager to get to the barracks."

"Tell me quickly about the blood on the wall in the cloakroom at least, then," said Edmund. "We have ten minutes, I'm certain."

The blood. Larchmont had pointed Lenox toward it the way a verger in a church might gesture at a fragment of the true cross.

It was sprayed in a light scatter against what was, as one faced into the room, the right-hand wall. There were a few strewn possessions on the bench beneath the blood. (The rest of the cloakroom was empty—evidently, according to Curbishley, Price, and Boothby, it had been that way both when they entered and when they left.) These items were all confirmed by his fellow officers as having belonged to Austen. It seemed plain that this had been the site of the attack.



Larchmont was clearly most interested in the blood, but Lenox leaned down to the bench and examined with great care the trivia of Austen's pockets. He pulled a notebook from his own breast pocket and wrote an itemized list:

Rail ticket, 1:09 Charing Cross to Ipswich, 3rd Class  
Short-brimmed civilian's hat  
Bill from Olivetti's in the amount of one shilling sixpence  
Copy of previous day's *Times*  
Copy of the army's *Gazette*  
Loose matches  
One shilling, thruppence in loose change

"Interesting," said Lenox.

"Is it?" asked Larchmont.

"May I inspect the hat?"

"By all means."

Lenox picked it up. "Not a lieutenant's cap."

"No. He would have worn his lieutenant's cap as long as he had on his uniform, according to his colleagues—that's why he forgot *this* hat in the cloakroom and had to go back in and retrieve it. Lieutenant Curbishley remembers him leaving it on the hook, whereas his bag was on the bench with his overcoat folded over it, so it makes sense that he would have remembered the bag and the overcoat but not the hat."

"I see."

Larchmont nodded. "As for its use, it would presumably have replaced the one for the other when he arrived at home in civvies."

"Yes."

The lining of the hat had been repaired twice, Lenox noted. "A heavy smoker," he said. "And yet no tobacco here among the items on the bench, I observe."

Larchmont frowned. "How do you know he was a heavy smoker?"

Lenox tapped the front brim of the hat. "This part of the hat alone is very strongly saturated by the smell of smoke. You can tell even in this room, which has had its share of smokers inside it. The hat has been washed very recently, and yet even for that the smell has remained."

Larchmont looked at him evenly. "What about the blood?"

Lenox stood up from his kneeling position. "A knife, I presume, was your conclusion?"

"Yes."

Lenox thought for some time. "You've noticed what isn't here? What's missing?"

"What?"

"His bag."

"Ah, yes."

"Did he bring it back in with him, or did he leave it out in Charing Cross with his friends as he dashed back inside?"

Larchmont looked faintly superior for a moment. "He brought it back with him into the cloakroom."

"His fellow officers said as much?"

"Yes. It was light, and he was already carrying it. But that corresponds to our working theory."

Lenox nodded. "I can guess."

"Oh?"

"I imagine that you must have concluded that he had intelligence valuable to the French on him."

"Oh." Larchmont looked nonplussed. "Well—yes, we did."

"You conjecture that the attacker stabbed him, rifled his pockets in case any valuable document was upon his person, left what he took out here upon the bench." Lenox gestured down toward the ticket, the newspapers. "That the attacker then forced Austen and his bag to the steam room, and from thence to some location where they could interrogate him at their leisure."

Larchmont nodded. To his credit he didn't look disappointed that his theory had been laid out. "Yes," he said. "This is why time is of the essence."

Lenox had never met a policeman good or bad who didn't adore that phrase. He thrust his hands into the pockets of his coat, thinking. "Of course. And yet—"

"What?"

"Would he have been likely to take valuable intelligence home to Ipswich with him?" Lenox asked. "And if the intelligence was only in his head, why bring the bag along, if you were the attacker dragging his body down that vent, with time a factor?"

Larchmont looked flummoxed. He took a moment to think, which was enormously to his credit. Finally, he said, "Perhaps it was just a matter of taking all precautions."

"Yes," said Lenox, slowly. "I could believe that."

"But?"

"Oh, nothing. Only thinking out loud." Lenox, hands in pockets, looked at the blood meditatively. "A spray such as this—a light spray—heavy enough, but not arterial..."

"The face, I supposed."

Lenox nodded. "That might well be right."

"Next steps, then, Mr. Lenox?" said Larchmont. "You have seen the room."

Lenox nodded, even more slowly this time, determined not to rush his own thinking. Time had taught him that lesson over and over.

"Is there nothing else here that draws your interest?" he said, at last.

"What do you mean?" asked Larchmont. Lenox knelt down, gazing underneath the sofa and the armchairs for a moment. Nothing there. As he rose, Larchmont met his gaze with a kind of level admonition. "Will you speak to me in riddles?"

"Not out of vanity," said Lenox, shaking his head somberly and rising to his feet. "Only because I am as puzzled as you are. And yet there is something telling in this room, something I can't quite describe. Even to myself. Let me ruminate on the whole thing, if you would. As soon as I feel able to aver any definite opinion you shall have it."

"You have none now?"

"I have ideas. But I am without great confidence in any of them. Let me go to his barracks, please, and then I will give you my full thoughts. I am due to meet my brother for lunch but I can be with you there just after one o'clock."

“Lieutenant Austen may be submitting to torture as you and I discuss his disappearance. Particularly if it is his mind, and not his valise, that carries the vital information the French desire.”

“I shall not idle,” said Lenox. “I only ask time to consider the case in its full dimensions. In the meanwhile, I presume your constables are following all leads that might emerge from the steam room?”

“Yes, of course.”

“In that case, the ninety minutes will not cost us. My own physical activity would be *de minimis* in relation to what they are doing. I will see you at the barracks at one o’clock, or just after, and you have my assurance that Lieutenant Austen will not be away from my thoughts in that time, Mr. Larchmont.”

“Did you really need it, this time?” Edmund, having listened to this story, asked, as the carriage neared the Wellington barracks—for of course the lunch in question had been theirs, the period during which the Lenox brothers had assessed and selected their Christmas trees.

“I did,” said Charles.

“Why?”

“I think there’s every chance Larchmont is correct. In fact, I fear I shall have to break my promise to him—I don’t know that I can present him with a conclusion even now. Still, there are one or two incidental facts that I can’t shake. And of course I did want to come see you and the tree, catch Jane.”

The truth was that Charles still worried about his widowed brother. It would take more urgent circumstances than these to persuade him to miss one of their meetings. “Anyhow,” said Edmund, “you are three minutes early. Punctual.”

“The courtesy of kings.”

Edmund laughed—it had been their father’s favorite, or at least most tritely fatherly, phrase. “Just so.”

Christmas had always had a sacred feel about it in their family. Growing up, it had been their kind but rather stern father’s month of generosity, when he loosened himself slightly. By tradition each of the boys had received some present for which they had been yearning all year (often it was a pet, though Lenox never did receive a rabbit), an orange, and an enormous slab of Harrod’s chocolate wrapped in its magical red wax paper.

With skill the chocolate could be made to last till mid-January.

The senior Lenox had also by tradition visited at each of his tenants’ houses in the week before Christmas. He gave every family a goose, and along with it a gold coin for each member of the family; it was understood somehow (as far as Lenox knew it had never been explicitly stated) that the possession of these was utterly independent, so that each member of the family had their own collection; some gambled away within a night at the pub, others hoarded for years—and that even the most tyrannical paterfamilias, even during the leanest months, couldn’t confiscate their children’s or wives’ Christmas coins, or word would trickle back to the squire—it always, always did—and he would withhold the grant the next five Decembers. Such had been the tradition; date of inauguration uncertain.

One year, to the astonishment of all, a woman named Mrs. Attlebury, who had never so much as set eyes on the sea—who had never left the town as far as anyone could reckon, much less the county—had traveled to Plymouth by post, put twenty-seven gold coins on a stile, and bought herself a nineteen-foot yacht in ivory white, newly constructed and fit for a prince of the royal blood. After two months of lessons (she had twenty-three gold coins left, being a woman of fifty) she had set sail for Bermuda. Letters still regularly returned from thence to Market House, in care of her perennially astonished cousins, who read them aloud to anyone who would listen.

And there were Sussex pubs where you might still hear the phrase “fat as a Lenox goose.”

Their father had been gone for many years, but Edmund had maintained these traditions, along with the habit of making Christmas a matter of the first importance in his own family. Trees on the steps of a London townhouse. And an anxious word to Lady Jane here and there about dinner in two nights: There would be hot chestnuts, correct? Treacled currants? Someone would play the piano? For these were the Lenox forms.

“Anyhow,” Lenox went on, “the whole force of Scotland Yard is involved in the search. My own energy in this case must be mental, not physical.”

“This poor lieutenant is doomed, then,” said Edmund.

“Ha, ha. You’re very droll.”

Sir Edmund Lenox grinned. “Here are your barracks.”

“Thanks for the lift. Good luck in Parliament. I hope the mutton and roasted potatoes they bring you at Parliament are frigid, you wretch.”

Boothby was a tall, handsome, slender-fingered figure with blond hair smoothed down by some oil far, far more refined than beef suet. He looked dashing, a Russian officer’s idea of an officer. A young girl’s idea of an officer.

Of the three men who had been with Austen at Charing Cross, he was the only one who had canceled his trip home. “Have a girl here anyhow,” he said, smiling apologetically. He twirled a small cigar in his fingers as he and Lenox spoke. He had offered the detective an identical one from a gold case. He’d still yet to light his own. “Rotten luck for Austen, though.”

“Do you think Price or Curbishley could have been involved in his disappearance?”

Boothby had a military man’s phlegm, and didn’t react. “Impossible,” he said.

They were at the barracks, standing in an anteroom just outside of the officer’s mess, a wide hall just visible through an open door. The mess itself looked rather like the room in which you might have expected to dine at a great British country home, lined with oil portraits of former officers, heavy-laden with silver, the tablecloths of Grenadier check.

“I take it that you were not, either, then?”

“No, Mr. Lenox,” said Boothby again, in a tone that implied the detective was intellectually subnormal.

Inspector Larchmont was waiting for the regiment’s colonel, who was, of course, a busy person. In the meanwhile they had permitted Lenox this assay at Boothby.

He proceeded to ask him all the questions he would routinely pose to this sort of witness, in this sort of matter: to walk him through their travels; their lunch at Olivetti's; what each had eaten; whether Austen had been acting unusually in any way; what exactly they saw in the cloakroom when they left their things there; when they fetched their things; and then finally what they had seen when they had gone to check on Austen.

The lieutenant slowly relaxed. His account was very straightforward. They had spotted the blood straightaway. It had taken them longer to discover the grate that had been unscrewed and set aside.

"Did you consider going through it and after him?"

Boothby shook his head. "By that time a porter had been fetched, and he explained what it was and where it led. Six or seven minutes had passed, and two constables had already been dispatched around the corner to the steam room. We shone a light."

In the pronunciation of shone—something like *shawn*—Lenox heard his own schooling all in a single syllable, a single redolent syllable. "I see."

"I would have been down the vent like a shot hare," Boothby added, quick to make it clear that there was no trepidation involved in his decision, "but there seemed no point."

"Of course." Lenox consulted his notepad. "How long until the police arrived—the police proper, rather than the Charing Cross constable?"

"Half an hour, I would have said?"

"And now a more general question—can you describe Lieutenant Austen to me?"

"A first-rate soldier."

There was no *but* lurking behind that bit of praise. "Respected by his men?"

"As well as his peers and his superiors, yes. Extremely."

"I take it as a matter to be stipulated that he would never sell intelligence to the French."

The unlit cigar twirled in Boothby's fingers. "He would rather die. As would I. We are Grenadiers."

"You were close friends with him, then?"

"Close in the sense that I would trust him with my life unthinkingly, but not close friends, no. He has no particularly close friends among the officers. He did, MacLean, but MacLean was seconded in July to a regiment in the Azores, given temporary command of it. Plum of a posting, as a matter of fact."

There was a slight tang of bitterness in this last comment. A posting Boothby had coveted himself, perhaps. "He and MacLean were birds of a feather?"

"Yes. Not quite so social. Don't mistake me—both my brothers, you know. But one will always find oneself nearer or farther to certain individuals in a group such as ours, even where the respect among the officers is unvarying."

"Who is your nearest friend, then?"

"Of the men at lunch? Tom Price, certainly. But as I said, all three are my brothers and shall be forever. We were all down in the freezing mud during training together, all of us were up fifty-five hours in the final exercises, keeping each other afloat when it seemed as if we couldn't go on. This regiment is as one. Indeed, we are assisting the Yard in the search."

"Are you?" said Lenox curiously. "Interesting."

“To be expected, I would have thought?”

Lenox looked at his notepad again. “Did Austen have a girl?”

“Austen? I should say so. He’s married.”

That was a new piece of information to Lenox. “Billeted here?”

“Yes. Well, in quarters near Sloane Square. All the married officers are there, the bachelors here.”

Just at that moment, Larchmont came in. “The colonel has a moment to see you now,” he said to Lenox.

The detective nodded, first at the Inspector, then to Boothby. “Very well.”

What he knew, from the inquiries that he had made that morning, and what Larchmont likely did not, was that Boothby, the suave and confident young officer in front of them, was in desperate debt—some thirty thousand pounds, a sum whose tenth part he had no hope of procuring—and that it was not a debt to gentlemen, but to men who would attempt its collection in very violent ways, in preference to forgiving it.

“Thank you very much, Lieutenant Boothby. Your account has been valuable.”

Boothby dipped his head with the same elegance all his physical motions had. “Not at all.”

By four o’clock it was as good as midnight. The lamps along the street were losing the same battle they set out to lose every night in winter; on this one, at least, there was some sparkle from the shop windows, which had brightened themselves into gayness for the Christmas season—in one a display of a toy train set, powered by a very small engine, in another a row of handsome books bound in morocco leather, in a third a display of pomades and scents for “the dandy gentleman.”

These included one that caught Lenox’s eye because it had upon the lid of its tin a positively terrifying image of a man bedeviled by dandruff, his face wracked with misery. It announced that it was “an agreeable magnolia balm and effectual scurf,” the kind of phrasing that might have had more charm if their model didn’t look as if he were being eaten from the feet up by rats.

He thought of Larchmont’s beef suet; Boothby’s delicately scented *coiffure*.

Lenox turned up Chancery Lane from Carey Street. These shops—appealing to well-to-do men and women of the middle class, with ample money for Christmas spending—matched the neighborhood, which was near the courts and therefore various law offices and counting houses. The men he passed were uniformly well-dressed and well-shaved.

This was where the offices of Lenox’s detective agency were. And though their flourishing staff was somewhat reduced, because of the holiday, there were still some half-dozen men at work at slanted artists’ desks in the large central room of the offices. Lenox nodded to them, then went to one of the private offices that branched off of this room and knocked on the door.

“Come in, unless you’re going to make me angry,” a woman’s voice called out.

Lenox opened the door. “Hard to predict.”

Polly Dallington smiled at him—wearily. “Hello, Charles. No, it was Winston, he was asking too many questions about something he should have been able to handle in a trice. Simple factory theft.”

Jonathan Winston was one of their junior detectives. "He's got it now?"

"Yes, finally. What has happened about Austen?"

"Answer me something, would you?"

"Only too happily, if I can."

Polly was one of the agency's three partners. Lenox was another; the third was his protégé, though perhaps that word had become superannuated, since the relationship had lasted so long, and the protégé's own abilities grown significant in that time. He was a young Lord with a terrible reputation as a rake: who happened, now, to be the most devout husband, home by six each night, rarely happier than when turning down an invitation, eyes for no woman but one—Polly. His name was Lord John Dallington. He was in West Bromwich at the moment, working.

Polly was the most organized of the three, in all essentials their manager or "boss," as the modern industrialists might call her in the new slang, though Lenox had the most brilliant deductive mind of the three, and Dallington a kind of instinctive derring-do that often led to results. They made a good trio. Polly had introduced countless innovations—a botanist, an expert in poisons, a portrait artist who could draw very sharp likenesses, and numerous other helpful experts, on permanent retainer and at their disposal. She had also closely supervised the hiring of associate detectives, who proved, with their eagerness to win "case bonuses" for successfully resolved issues, efficient and valuable.

All three of the partners were going to finish 1877 richer than they had started it, somewhat startlingly.

"How much do you think the French would pay for the right piece of information?"

Polly tilted her head thoughtfully. She was a slender woman in a muslin dress, sleeves rolled back above the wrist so that she could write without getting ink on it. Her expertise was in domestic crimes—missing fiancées, stolen silver—but recently the agency had taken several high-profile cases which brushed up against the loose confederacy of British spies.

"You would know better than I," she said. "An almost unlimited amount for the *right* information. The schematics of a British garrison, for instance, or the schedule of its shipping passages."

France and England were rather like an unhappy couple out to supper at friends': not presently at war, except in the sense that they were continually at war. "Unlimited."

"Ten thousand pounds? Fifty thousand pounds in African gold? I have no very definite idea. LaFargiere is lurking around Eaton Square these days. There was a party he threw only the other evening that the Earl of Westmoreland attended as blithely as a maiden in spring. If only they knew what that man was capable of."

LaFargiere was a French agent, with perhaps sixty bodies to his credit; or his debit, if you were to think of it religiously.

Lenox nodded, thinking. "I see."

Boothby possessed only two things of value: his commission, and whatever intelligence had been entrusted to him as an officer. (That gold cigar case and its cousinage, his cufflinks and tiepins and so on, could perhaps have fetched a couple hundred pounds in a pinch.) He could sell out his commission in the

Grenadiers for eight thousand pounds or so, perhaps ten to the right buyer. A very fine sum, of course—many people could have lived whole lives one end to the other comfortably on the interest from it—but far short of what his lenders were asking.

Whereas a piece of intelligence—well.

Lenox had stopped here on the way to Sloane Square, where Austen's wife was billeted. He had several active cases, and he wanted to leave instructions for their management, since the Austen business was evidently going to be a complicated one. Pointilleux, their young French associate, could handle his other work for now.

Lenox sat for a while with Polly, describing the course of his day to her. A second set of ears was always helpful in these circumstances.

The colonel of the Grenadiers, he told her, had been a remarkably precise rendition of a colonel of the Grenadiers. That was to say: He'd had a bushy moustache, a clear direct gaze, and looked as if he would happily lead his men on a charge over any hill you care to point out, at any latitude. His name was Sydney.

Lenox had asked him if Austen's family was present in London.

"Only his wife, Mr. Lenox. His father and two sisters in Suffolk have been informed. Scotland Yard wired them in the immediate aftermath of the event, and an hour later I wired them myself."

"What did they reply?"

"Thus far we have had no reply."

Lenox glanced at Larchmont, who nodded to indicate that the Yard had received no word either. "Can you give me Austen's character?" asked Lenox.

"Unimpeachable. My second best officer."

"Who is your best?"

"Anthony St. Pearce. The men are in love with him, which is occasionally of help in battle. Otherwise he and Austen are on a par. Austen's men like him very much—they just aren't in love. A small difference, but it's the answer to your question."

Sydney spoke with the absolute certainty of someone who had seen hundreds of men die and live and win and lose for hundreds of reasons. "You would not suspect him of treason," Lenox said.

"Quite literally the last man in the regiment," said Sydney crisply.

Larchmont leaned forward. "If you could give us some indication of which units of the French military might be adversarially inclined toward Lieutenant Austen, Colonel, it would—"

Sydney had shaken his head. "I'm afraid I cannot."

The conversation had ended shortly thereafter. Very little useful information. Larchmont, increasingly desperate, had decided to return to the central investigative office to see if any corpses had turned up. Lenox said he was going to see Austen's wife.

First he had stopped here, however.

With a thoughtful look, Polly said, "Do you find it odd that the other two officers, Curbishley and Price, simply carried on with their plans for leave?"

"I don't know. Leave is very precious to these fellows from what I gather."

She nodded. "Mm."



“Boothby made it clear that he was settling for a London leave primarily because of a young lady here. A jolly Christmas they’ll have together, too, no doubt.”

Polly smiled wearily. “I hope Lady Jane will make ours jolly. I could use an hour away from my desk.”

The Dallingtons were due to come to Christmas supper. “What are you hoping to be left in the tree?”

“I?” Polly stretched her arms back, and he saw again the tiredness around her eyes. “I would only like John to come back from West Bromwich, curse the place. No, who can say. I’ve gotten him a new walnut inkstand. I’ve no doubt he’ll hate it. I couldn’t think of anything else.”

“He’ll love it.”

“In my dreams I envision the two of us leaving on a honeymoon at last.”

“A honeymoon.”

She smiled. “Yes, Venice was my fancy. But obviously we could never spare two weeks from the agency.”

“True, alas.”

“In a year or two, perhaps. That is my hope.”

Polly and Dallington had returned straight to work after their wedding. Her office was comfortable—closer to a sitting room than either Dallington’s or Lenox’s offices were, paneled with soft blue velvet, comfortable seats here and there, comfortingly lit. But not a home, still.

Polly daydreamed for a moment, gazing into a space above and behind Lenox, then turned her gaze sharply on him. “I know you, Charles Lenox. Something is bothering you. What is it?”

He was quiet a moment. Then he said, with an amused smile, “You’re quite right. Do you know what it is? Well—there are several things. But do you know what the first of them is, the one that I can’t let alone?”

“What?”

“It’s that third-class ticket. A lieutenant of the Grenadiers, from a family of means. Traveling home by third class.”

She looked at him for a moment, and then smiled, no weariness in her face this time. “You’re splendid.”

“Splendid?”

“I wouldn’t have noticed it, but you’re entirely correct—third class. It’s unthinkable that a lieutenant of the Grens should have been traveling third class. It’s like picturing a leopard on the underground. Impossible.”

Austen’s wife was a beautiful woman. She had raven-black hair, and large, tender dark eyes. Lenox just wondered, from the way she walked as she led him into their flat, if she might be with child.

She had received a wire that Lenox might come to see her, and had therefore greeted him without surprise. Dully, she invited him in. She pointed to a chair by the potbelly stove—the kitchen and living room opened into each other uninterrupted—and herself sat on a deal chair in front of a closet door, leaving a long, tightly upholstered blue sofa between them.

This was generous, since Lenox's spot was where it would be warmest, and the flat was cold, cramped, and dark.

Still, it was a slightly awkward distance across the room, and he had to lean forward as he offered his commiseration: a difficult time for her; a happy outcome by no means improbable; Christmas still to be salvaged; and so forth.

"Thank you, Mr. Lenox," she said, hurrying him through these kindnesses. "Were there questions you wished to ask me?"

Lenox nodded. "Only a few." He glanced around the room, which was spartan in the extreme, indeed, nearly undecorated. "How long have you made your home here?"

"Five months."

"From the date you were married?"

She nodded. "Yes, exactly."

"How did you and Lieutenant Austen meet?"

"We are from the same part of the country originally."

Lenox frowned. "Did you not consider going to Ipswich with your husband for the holiday?" he asked.

She hesitated; in her face was a look of uncertainty.

At last she spoke. "I wish I had, now, of course," she said. "He intended to see his family quickly and return on the morning of Christmas day to see me. I was to prepare our dinner here. Homier, that way."

There was nothing homey about this room whatsoever, though. "I see. If I could ask, had Lieutenant Austen ever expressed any anxiety over being abducted?"

"Not to me. He was very careful not to worry me with details of his work."

"Sometimes couples find that sharing a problem halves it."

"I suppose so," she said. "It gives the other person half a problem, too."

Had it been so comfortless a marriage? Lenox smiled, though. "Yes. I hadn't thought of it quite in that way."

"In any event his work was secret."

Lenox nodded. "I wonder, do you know why your husband would have been traveling third class?"

"Pardon?"

"By train. His ticket was a third-class one."

She looked bewildered. "Is that not—Is there something wrong with it?"

Now it was Lenox's turn to look at her oddly.

The classes of a British train were an apt metaphor for the country's entire steel-strong social order: in first class, aristocrats and gentry, in second, the middle and business class, in third, the lower. Invariably. There were men who had made enormous fortunes, yet still didn't dare to move up from second class to first. At least one heard as much anecdotally.

An officer of the Grenadiers, by definition of excellent birth, by profession a confirmed aristocrat, would never have traveled anywhere except in the first-class carriage. Second, at a great, great financial pinch.

Never third.

"Were your own parents acquainted with Lieutenant Austen's?" Lenox asked. "I take it you met in society."

She reddened. "What? Oh—yes. The usual country way."

"Do you often dine with your husband's brother officers, Mrs. Austen?"

"From time to time. My husband had a great friend named MacLean, but he was seconded away to Canada. They were friends, Lieutenant and Mrs. MacLean."

Lenox's face did not change; though Boothby had said the Azores. "I see."

"The colonel's wife is extremely kind. We have a sewing circle for the children of the orphanages, all of us officers' wives. I am a very good hand at that kind of thing, you see." She was brightening slightly. "For Christmas there was a great lot to do, and Lieutenant Price's wife—Margaret—became a friend."

"Lieutenant Price was with your husband at Olivetti's on the day he went missing."

"Yes. We had hopes of making a match with them, you know—as couples will. Allen—my husband—liked Tom Price a great deal. And, as I say, I liked Margaret Price."

Lenox smiled sympathetically. "It must be difficult to enter a new regiment."

Her pale cheeks reddened again. "Yes, I suppose. I have my husband, on the other hand. He is everything to me."

There was a passion in her voice that gave this declaration credibility—and yet was somehow at odds with the earlier parts of their conversation. "Are you sure that you have not overheard anything odd your husband said? Or that he has not told you anything?"

"No. No! The inspector asked me the same, as if I did not wish I could help—no, nothing!"

"Nothing about France, for instance."

"No! I—" She stopped short. "France?"

"Had he referred to France recently?"

She looked troubled. Near at hand there was a little scrap of sewing on a round table, and she rearranged it unnecessarily, squaring it off, avoiding Lenox's eye. "I can't quite recall."

"Mrs. Austen," he said gently.

Reluctantly, she met his gaze. "Yes?"

"Had your husband mentioned France recently?"

"It barely seems worth mentioning."

"Everything is worth mentioning."

"I had dreamed once of him taking his leave to go to Paris with me. Women like a dress, you know. Anyhow, he told me a week or two since that soon such a trip wouldn't be possible."

"I see."

"That's all."

Lenox nodded. "Mm."

"I doubt very much that—I do not know who attacked him, but I doubt very much that it had anything to do with that meaningless conversation, Mr. Lenox."

"Are you well-acquainted with Lieutenant Boothby, Mrs. Austen?" Lenox asked.

Her face went cold. "No, sir."

He was staring at the hem of her dress. It had been mended recently. He glanced around the room again—its few creature comforts—a larder that looked as if it could have used a Lenox goose. A small portrait of the Queen. A traveling bag in the kitchen, open, with a sewing kit atop it. The remnants of a small meal.

Was this poverty?

If her husband was declared dead, his commission would be sold out at auction, and she would receive ten thousand pounds or so, free and clear. The law was crystal clear: The money went to the wife.

It made her a suspect, alas.

"Thank you for your time, Mrs. Austen. I am sorry you've had to endure this."

"I wish I could be of more help."

She shifted in her chair uncomfortably, arching her back just slightly, perhaps as a woman carrying a child would, or perhaps—

And it was in this moment that Lenox solved the case, or at least circled halfway closer inward toward the answer than he had until that moment.

He attempted to keep his face impassive. "Thank you for all you have told me," he said. His hat was in his lap, and he lifted it, rising from his own chair by the warm potbelly stove. "I'm very grateful. And as I said, I have every hope that we may find Lieutenant Austen in perfect health."

"I do, too," she said.

She didn't look as if she believed it.

Lenox left. On the stairwell he donned his hat. He thought of the clue that confirmed his ideas. If one wanted to be clever, one would have said: Dust, in the end all of us come to dust.

The confirmation of his suspicions would involve two trips, one long, one short.

He would take the long one first thing in the morning, but at the moment he was tired.

He stopped at a busy telegraph office and sent three wires. The first two were to friends. The third went to Larchmont.

*Strong lead STOP No arrests to make as yet STOP Searching parties may be reduced overnight if required elsewhere STOP Will communicate results tomorrow afternoon at latest STOP Best wishes Lenox STOP*

It was after seven by the time he returned home. Sophia was being put to sleep in her nursery, and Jane was in the dining room, supervising the footmen as they took apart in leaves the long dining table at which the family ate their meals, and replaced it with four small circular tables.

"We cannot all fit around the large table?" Lenox asked.

She had given him a distracted kiss, and now gave him a distracted wave of the hand. She was clutching a diagram upon which he saw the names of their guests. "Leave it to me, would you?"

Feeling as dejected as the wan tree in the corner of the room, which had still yet to be decorated in any fashion, Lenox gave her a squeeze on the arm and retreated down the front hall toward his study. He tapped the bell on the front hall table, then went to his desk, where the day's correspondence lay, ready for him.

Kirk appeared a moment later. "Sir?"

"What am I to have for dinner?"

“There are potatoes, sir, and there is a fine lamb chop.”

“Could the cook put some kind of soup together? It’s devilishly cold.”

“Why, certainly, sir,” said the massive butler, his face troubled. He glanced down toward the end of the room. “Shall I stoke the fire?”

“No, it’s fine. The soup can come last. Just bring me a coffee with whisky, and the chop, and the evening papers, if you would. I have some thinking to do.”

He was up at five the next morning. The train to Ipswich took several hours, and, according to his Bradshaw’s, the first one of the morning left Charing Cross at 5:36.

He kissed Jane in her sleep, then stole out of the slumbering house. His carriage was waiting, per his orders from the night before, though his driver, who lifted his cap in a way that seemed to contain more fury than respect, was stony-faced as he waited for Lenox to climb in. Well, such was the lot of the carriage driver. He at least could come home and sleep away the morning after he had cared for the two horses.

Lenox had planned to get a bite of food at Charing Cross—perhaps even at Olivetti’s—but the mucked and rutted street outside the station was crowded, for some reason, perhaps because of the surfeit of travelers on Christmas journeys, and he had to rush to his train. He carried a thin valise with a book and a few papers in it.

On the train (in first class) he fell instantly into a deep sleep, his head against the cool window, the small but powerful heater in the carriage warming him. This was pleasant; but as a result he missed the food trolley. Before he knew it he was getting off the train into the frigid Suffolk morning.

The sun had risen without appearing, in the way it sometimes did. There was a dense, even veil of clouds in the sky. Ipswich was on the Orwell River, and the wind positively cracked off of it.

There were no cabs to be seen. Lenox went to the stationmaster. “Are there hansoms?” he asked.

“If you wait awhile,” said the stationmaster, who looked toasty in his booth, mug of tea close by.

“Do you know the residence of a Mr. Austen? Reverend Austen, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes.” He pointed at a small lane between two large houses. “One mile, over the bridge and straight down that road. Impossible to miss. Middleman House.”

“I shall walk, then—thank you.”

“Not at all.”

“Thank you again.”

Lenox started his walk. Before long, though, he wished dearly that he could have withdrawn his thanks to the stationmaster: For it was not a mile to Middleman House, unless you measured your miles very long.

Indeed, only some forty minutes later did the detective, half-frozen and absolutely starved, see a sign on a low stone wall, which said MIDDLEMAN HOUSE.

It must have been nearer three miles than one, he thought.

He looked over the wall and saw a rather pretty half-castle, ancient by appearance, with a pond next to it and wild, very beautiful gardens on either side of the gravel path that led from the road to the house.

He walked the hundred or so yards up this avenue and knocked on the door, curious what would greet him.

A woman in a bonnet answered. "Help you, sir?" she asked meekly.

"I am here to speak with Reverend Austen. It is about his son."

"Please wait, if you wouldn't mind."

She looked apologetic as she closed the door in his face—softly, to her credit.

Not a home of the first welcomingness.

Lenox glanced about him. In this stone entranceway he was at least protected from the worst of the wind. There were benches on either side of the door and, above them, elaborate sconces.

A moment later the door opened again. A small, dark-haired man in a clerical collar, wearing spectacles, an angry and suspicious set to his face, was behind it this time. "Yes?" he said. "I'm the master of this house. What is this about?"

"I am here to speak with you about your son, Lieutenant Allen Austen, sir," Lenox said. "My name is Charles Lenox. He has disappeared."

"Yes. We received two wires to that effect—the second superfluous, obviously. What of it?"

Lenox was taken aback, but said, without hesitation, "There are a few questions I had hoped to ask you."

A stormy look came onto the man's face. "You've come for nothing then."

"I won't take much of your time."

"On the contrary—you won't take any of my time."

The Reverend began to shut the door. In that moment, Lenox made a decision to do something he did as rarely as possible: lie. "I'm with Scotland Yard, sir," he said. "By law you are required to answer my questions."

The Reverend paused, looking at Lenox. The door was all but closed. His face was indecisive, and in that wavering moment Lenox identified his antagonist; he was a crabbed and black-hearted old specimen, who was no doubt domineering within the spheres he commanded—this house and the church, they would have been—but not for that reason necessarily domineering by nature, indeed perhaps even slightly fearful. Certainly provincial. He had no obligation whatsoever to speak to Lenox even if Lenox had been from the Yard, but it was obvious that he didn't know that.

Lenox's gamble paid off. Austen's eyes narrowed angrily, but he said, "Come in then."

They went down a dark hallway, which opened into what was a very fine great-room.

Lenox was sincerely curious about the house. There was evidence all over it of wealth and ancient lineage—tapestries on the walls, enormous hunting scenes in oils, tables of marble—but none of generosity. The fire in the vast hearth was small. By it was a comfortable chair. The Reverend's own, no doubt.

Two women were on a sofa set farther away from the warmth of the fire. Austen's sisters—almost certainly.

Lenox bowed to them, and both rose infinitesimally. They were similar in looks, with their father's suspicious faces, though still rather strikingly beautiful.

Four insolent footmen stood against the back wall of the room in livery, one of them leaning back in a way that would have seen him fired in many houses, all smirking.

Austen took his chair. He made no indication that Lenox should sit.

"Well?" he said abruptly.

Lenox turned toward the two women. "I am Charles Lenox," he said, introducing himself in the least rude way he could consider; it was the Reverend's task, but Lenox could not leave it undone, as a gentleman.

"These are my daughters Diana and Evelyn. State your business."

"I am investigating the disappearance of your son, sir."

"We have nothing to do with it," said the Reverend. He was cutting an apple into sections for himself, and Lenox's empty stomach felt a pitiful stirring. He hadn't eaten since the night before. It was nearly ten o'clock. On the road between the station and Middleman House he had hoped he might find some inn or pub, but there had been none. "I haven't seen my son since his marriage, and have no intention of doing so again—so you see, sir, he has disappeared regardless of whether *you* say he has disappeared."

The old man grinned to himself at his wit. "His wife is extremely concerned," Lenox said.

"Is she? Good."

Lenox glanced at the two daughters. They were both busy with needlework, but he could sense the keenness of their attention. "She was the cause of your falling out with your son?"

Suddenly, as if by irresistible impulse, the daughter named Diana said, "The best thing he could have done is run away from her. Probably that is what he has done. Into some other harlot's arms, no doubt."

She crossed herself.

Lenox had known since his meeting with Mrs. Austen that she was a pretender to her husband's class. There had been a moment when this suspicion was locked into place: Just as Boothby's use of the word "shone" had instantly identified his background, so had Mrs. Austen's use of "dinner" and "pardon," in place of "supper" and "excuse me."

And then there had been her lack of surprise at Austen's traveling by third class.

Lenox's job now was to draw the full story out of these reluctant interlocutors. "I understand that her parents were your acquaintances in society, Miss Austen?" he said, his voice innocent of implication.

Her eyes widened. "Society! Her mother was our washing woman!"

"Silence!" the Reverend croaked from his chair.

"Society!" said Miss Austen again, apparently unable to help herself.

The Reverend was furious. "Mr. Lenox, if you have further questions you may address them to me."

"You fell out with your son over his marriage, then?" Lenox said.

"That cannot possibly have anything to do with your investigation. My son is no doubt in some house of ill-repute, given his tastes."

“You bought his commission in the Grenadiers, sir?”

A hostile look passed across Austen’s face. “My wife died some years ago. Her family’s entail provided for his commission—by law. It was not my choice. He has not had a cent from me, nor will he ever. I do not care to know what he lives upon.”

Lenox, thinking back to that ascetic set of rooms in which the lieutenant and his wife lived, could have answered: very little.

So much was clear now. Lieutenant Austen, if he had defied his father, could have no expectation of further financial assistance. The quirk of his mother’s estate had granted him his commission, but every pound she otherwise possessed would have passed to her husband. As the great legal scholar Gladstone had observed, under British law the husband and wife are one person—and that person was the husband. A woman could make no will nor sign a contract; had no right to her children, or command over their education, their manner of upbringing, their discipline; she had no right whatsoever to her own income. Gradually much of this was changing, but very, very gradually indeed.

“Do you know a Lieutenant Boothby?” he asked.

“No.”

“A Lieutenant MacLean.”

“No. As I told you, I have had nothing to do with my son since his marriage.”

The two daughters had on their faces a righteous look, and nodded as their father spoke; and yet in the younger of the two, Lenox thought he saw just a shadow of doubt.

Behind them the door opened, and the housekeeper came in with a tray of tea and cookies. Lenox felt faint with relief.

Austen leaped out of his seat. “Who told you to bring that in, Annie?” he roared. “Take it away.”

“I thought—”

“You didn’t think!”

The housekeeper stood frozen in the doorway. “Shall I—”

“Take it away.”

But Lenox, though it killed him to do it, said, “I have had a long trip, and missed breakfast, sir, and would be grateful for—”

“Take it away!” Austen roared again.

The housekeeper turned and left, and Lenox glanced to the footmen, who were highly amused.

“You are the church’s priest?” Lenox asked.

Austen, who was still standing, took his cozy seat by the small fire again. “I have retired from the church,” he said in an obstinate tone. “I am a scholar of theology now. But that is my own business. We have moved on from the subject of my son. If there is nothing remaining to be said about him, I must beg you to leave us to the rest of our day.”

Lenox tried for a moment to think of what else he might ask.

But he was starving, and cold, and felt every year of forty-six. “Thank you for your time,” he said.



He left the great room unaccompanied, though one of the footmen trailed him through the front hall, as if to make sure he left without stealing anything. A final insult.

Outside again, he put on his hat and pulled up the collar of his jacket. It had begun to rain.

So hungry that he could barely think, and with the black mood of the house still under his skin, he walked up the avenue, turned left toward town, and ventured perhaps three hundred yards before he heard a voice.

“Sir!” it said.

He turned.

He had half expected it to be Austen’s younger sister, but in fact it was Annie, the housekeeper. She was bundled in a gray cloak. “Here you are, sir,” she said.

She handed him a cloth napkin. “What is it?” Lenox asked.

She had already turned, though. “Travel safely. Merry Christmas.”

He opened the napkin. In it was a rough slice of bread with cheese and ham on it, and a shortbread biscuit.

Lenox, almost weak with gratitude, called after her, “I cannot—you are very—”

But she only waved a dismissing hand, scurrying back toward that strangely cold and merciless house through the rain, fearful, no doubt, of being caught in this generous transgression.

Lenox stared after her for a moment, then fell ravenously to his modest meal, the cold rain falling around him, thinking that he had never eaten anything better.

In a Christmas tale out of one of the sentimental journals, say *Household Words*, Lenox’s unfortunate little tree would have been slowly coaxed back into life, gradually regained strength, tremulously soaked water into its slender outer tips, before finally bursting into lovely alpine green just in time for a marvelous Christmas morning.

What actually happened was, it died.

This occurred about halfway through the next day, Christmas Eve. Lenox was binding presents into the tree with string. He dropped one and, being a book, intended for Lady Jane, it crashed through the branches heavily.

Every single needle went with it, in a grand cascade down to the floor. All of them.

“Hm,” said Lenox.

Lady Jane, who was standing back a little ways, was silent for a second, then burst into laughter. She knelt to the floor, where he was crouched, and put her arms around him. “Never mind,” she said, still laughing. “We’ll put lights in it. We have Leigh’s electricity.”

“It was never much of a tree,” Lenox said, brushing needles off of the arm of his coat.

She kissed him on the cheek. “We can cheer it up. Leave it to me.”

Since his return from Ipswich, Lenox had been, perhaps, very slightly changed; even at what felt like this very late stage of his life, as a father, husband, professional detective, he was not immune to such revolutions within himself. It was a sense of gratitude. Who knew if it would last—did any mood?—but that

cold, strange, unhappy house had left its mark on him. To return to Hampden Lane and the embrace of his wife, to Sophia in a jumpingly bright state of mind, was to return to a sense that not all was ill with the world: and of just how fortunate he was to inhabit his generous little square of it.

The Christmas spirit, some might call that. No doubt the first time Reverend Austen had inspired it in his years upon the earth.

Lenox had walked back from Middleman Hall toward Ipswich, devouring the food that Annie had given him down to the last morsel. Arriving in town, he went to the train station and discovered that the next train was in ninety minutes. He set out to see the wonders of Ipswich for himself. When this was finished he had eighty-seven minutes left, and decided he would send a telegram.

It was to Larchmont. "*Hold corpses,*" it read. "*Lenox.*"

The teletypist, who was no doubt used to every stripe of bizarre and phantasmagoric and menacing message in his line of work, in addition to the tens of thousands of blander ones he'd sent, nevertheless raised his eyebrows slightly. "Corpses, sir? I have that correct?"

"Yes," said Lenox.

"As you please, sir. Merry Christmas."

The wire sent, Lenox went into a stationer's and acquired the morning papers, which he had awakened so early as to precede, a great rarity, then stopped next door and bought himself a packet of sandwiches in case the train back to London broke down.

But it had returned to the capitol without event, and he to Hampden Lane.

Now it was Christmas Eve, and, the long journey to Suffolk completed, he had only the short one left to make: to Sloane Square.

Mrs. Austen was at home. "Mr. Lenox?" she said, in confusion.

"I apologize for the intrusion," he said, standing at her doorstep. "I had just one or two more very simple questions."

She looked unenthusiastic, but turned and led him inside.

The little flat was no homier than it had been before. Upon the windowpanes there was the icy frost of the day. It would snow overnight, they said, the men who tracked the weather from Greenwich.

Lenox, fresh from the street, rubbed his hands together. "May I offer you a cup of tea?" she said.

"That would be lovely, if it's not an imposition. It's very kind of you."

"Of course," she said, and went to put the kettle on the little stove. The tea leaves she carefully took from a towel. Lenox saw they had been used once already, and the economy touched a pained part of his heart. When she offered milk and sugar, he was quick to decline, wondering to himself how precious her stores of those two staples must be. She presented him with a very pretty cup and saucer, painted with forget-me-nots. "Here you are. These were my husband's mother's own cups."

"Did you know her well?"

Mrs. Austen gestured for Lenox to sit again by the potbelly stove, and herself went again to the chair in front of the closet door, so that the awkward length of the sofa lay between them.

That awkward length.

“She died when he was young, unfortunately,” said Mrs. Austen.

“I imagine that was difficult.”

She didn’t reply directly. “What did you wish to ask me?” she said.

Ah. Here they arrived at the center of the matter.

Lenox took his teacup in both hands to warm them, and took a slow sip, buying himself a moment to respond.

At last, setting the cup down, he said, “You observe that I have come alone, this afternoon. Without Inspector Larchmont.”

She looked puzzled. “Yes, quite clearly.”

He stood up, hesitated, and then sat down again. “I am a little hoarse at the moment,” he said. “The weather. I wonder if you would mind moving to the sofa, so that I could preserve my voice?”

“I am more comfortable here,” she said.

It was precisely her discomfort in the chair she had chosen that interested him, however. “Or the settee, would you call it?”

She reddened. He had aimed his arrow to wound, and it had—“settee” being the lower classes’ synonym for a sofa. “Excuse me?” she said.

Lenox looked down at the floor, still thinking. “Well,” he said at last, “perhaps I shall tell you my ideas, and then we may have a frank conversation. The only question is whether you would prefer to move.”

“Why should I?”

“So that your husband can come out of the room behind you.”

Her eyes widened. There was a brief, electric silence, and then the door was flung open, and Lieutenant Allen Austen strode past his wife into the room, thunder on his face.

“Get out!” he said.

Lenox didn’t move.

The three remained there for another moment of strange silence, the noises of the street filtering up to the cold room, in which each figure, two seated, one standing, his body tense with readiness and rage, remained motionless.

“Get out!” said the Lieutenant again.

He looked very little like his father; he was much taller, had blond hair swept tidily back, and wore a moustache of dark blond hair. Though he was out of uniform, to a detective it was easy to spot him as a military man; his bearing said it all. (Professions Lenox could identify with a single glance: soldier, butcher, chimney sweep, journalist, barrister, lacemaker, gentleman.)

He wore a sack coat and dark blue trousers. They were a handsome couple.

Very mildly, addressing Austen’s wife, Lenox said, “Have you been to the Army officers’ cloakroom at Charing Cross Station, Mrs. Austen?”

“No,” she replied, her features chilled. They had been caught.

Lenox crossed one leg over the other. "One of the first things I noticed there was the extreme heaviness of the bolts of the grate through which Lieutenant Austen was reported to have been abducted."

"Bolts," she repeated, too much in shock to be very coherent.

"Yes. The abductor would have needed precisely the right tools to get the grate off. The bolts wouldn't have come away by hand."

"Is that so?" she said.

"Certainly not. Beyond that, the abductor would have had to rely on Lieutenant Austen re-entering the room alone, would he not?"

"I don't know."

"The concatenation of fortunate circumstances aiding our theoretical abductor only grows more far-fetched from there," Lenox went on. "How could this imagined assailant, for instance, whatever powers we may credit him with, have been sure of overpowering Lieutenant Austen, removing the grate, and getting through the ventilation system before one of his friends reentered the room?"

"I do not know."

"And indeed, what if one of these friends had also forgotten some object in the cloakroom? And returned in the middle of the attack? Immediately—immediately—I felt uncomfortable with the theory that Lieutenant Austen had been attacked and abducted."

Austen looked furious. "Get out," he said again, though the energy was draining from him.

"And yet there was that enigmatic spray of blood, and there were his objects on the bench in the cloakroom—your objects, sir, including your very rail ticket—and there was, most importantly, no sign, anywhere, of Lieutenant Ernest Austen."

"Will you toy with us, then?" said Austen, still standing. "What is it you want?"

Lenox looked down, his eyes hooded. "As I informed your wife, Lieutenant Austen, I came without Inspector Larchmont."

"What is that supposed to mean, then? You wish a bribe?"

Lenox ignore that. "I traveled to Ipswich yesterday."

"Much good may it have done you," said Austen bitterly, and crossed the room, flinging himself down on the sofa, leaning against an armrest so that his right hand half-covered his face.

"Having spoken to your father, it seemed doubtful to me that you would have planned to return to that part of the country for the holiday."

"Oh?"

"Was Annie in your father's employ, when you were still on terms with him, sir?"

For the first time Austen looked him straight in the eye, and his face softened slightly. "Annie?"

"She is fair browbeaten, I fear, sir. But a courageous person."

Austen meditated upon this for a moment. "Anyhow," he said at last.

"Shall I go on?" Lenox said.

Neither of the couple had the vigor to resist the question's implications. "If you wish," Austen said.

"I reached into the tunnel by which you were meant to have departed. My hand came away as dusty as an abandoned house. It was then that I knew nobody had been down it. It is also when I thought to look under the sofa."

The sofa in the cloakroom was one of those pieces of furniture in which the age specialized, enormous and ugly. It could easily have seated eight. It was upholstered in a heavy crimson color, and had gold tassels hanging heavily from its base.

Underneath it, if you looked past the tassels, there was a sort of joist for support, usual for such a large piece of furniture.

"There was just space enough for a man between the two parallel boards, I thought," said Lenox. "A conscientious inspector would have looked behind the tassels, but no further."

Austen's eyes told Lenox that he had found the truth. "Well?" said the Lieutenant.

"Then there was the bench. The spray of blood looked injurious, but not fatal, nor even profoundly inconvenient. From an arm, perhaps?" Lenox looked over Austen, but saw no bandage. His clothes were probably concealing it. "At any rate. Underneath the spray of blood were your things. An interesting assortment!"

"Oh?"

"I have visited your apartments here twice now, and though it may sound indelicate to say, I would imagine that money is a difficulty for you. Hence the third-class ticket. If you weren't going to use the thing anyway..."

"Oh, finish, would you, damn it," said Austen.

Lenox knew he was home. "And money is the reason, I take it, for all of this?" There was a silence. "Anyhow. I also noticed that there was no tobacco among the objects, though you were clearly a very heavy smoker. Too precious to leave behind, I imagine."

"Finish, finish," said Austen, restlessly. He had no doubt been in these confined rooms all week. "Have it all out, damn you."

Lenox nodded neutrally. "Very well. As I envision it, you cut yourself, scattered your belongings on the bench, removed the grate, concealed yourself under the sofa, and waited to be missed by your friends. If you had the right tools—and I don't know how long you were planning this operation, whether you did reconnaissance work—you could have had the whole thing done in under a minute.

"At some moment in the ensuing commotion you found time to slip away. That wouldn't have been hard. It was thirty minutes before any real police officer was present; all would have been in chaos, people in and out of the room. May I ask when you left, just out of curiosity?"

"When Boothby went to fetch a second constable, and the first was examining the grate," Austen said flatly.

"Very good. Out of the room, you were in Charing Cross—invisible. You returned home. Your wife, when she had visitors, sat in the least convenient and least comfortably situated place in the sitting room, so that she could guard against anyone going into the room in which you were concealed."

It was this, Mrs. Austen's strange choice to sit in the room's least comfortable position, in front of that door, that had produced Lenox's moment of realization.

She looked at him helplessly. "What do you intend to do?" she asked.

He glanced down at the traveling bag he had noticed in the kitchen, with the sewing kit atop it. There was also the needlepoint she had straightened. "Your

finances are desperate enough that you have taken sewing in, I see," he said. This was hard, poorly paid work. "Your bag is ready."

"You wouldn't believe the cost of even the simplest officer's life in the Grenadiers," said Austen, his voice still terribly bitter. They had been so close to escape. "It is oppressive."

"And the next ship bound for the Azores departs on the twenty-seventh," Lenox said.

He had done much to astonish the pair; but this was the first time they both looked at him, simultaneously, with astonishment.

"How did you know?" Austen asked.

"I have told you a very great deal, now," said Lenox. "Come clean with me, and we will see what can be done for a poor and unhappy couple at Christmas time."

It was only Austen himself who had planned to take the ship three days hence to the Azores. These islands, just off the Portuguese coast, were less than two weeks' journey away; he could have been in Ponta Delgada, a very great distance indeed from the Wellington barracks, not long after Epiphany.

The travel bag with the sewing on top—it was his. Their plan was that his wife would follow him in the spring, after she had been paid out the sum fetched by his commission, be it seven or eight or twelve thousand pounds—a fortune, given that they were getting by on shillings a day now. Until then she would live upon the wages of her sewing, and on the aid of the regiment's wives, who had already proven themselves kind to her.

By the time she reached the Azores, MacLean, their dear friend, who was there, would have helped Austen decide on a course of action. He might try to make his fortune in India; America; even Portugal. A man with energy, money, and love could do very great things in any number of colonies.

"You shouldn't have told me that Mr. MacLean went to Canada," Lenox said, "when I knew that he was not there. A lie too far."

Mrs. Austen said nothing. Her husband shook his head. "You've played cat and mouse with us, Mr. Lenox. Now decide whether you have pinned us to eat us, or to play with us. No more of these little insights."

Lenox nodded. It was a fair and gentlemanly request. He had one question left, however. "Why not just sell your commission?" he asked.

"That money would have reverted to my father by law," he said. "Whose stated goal, on the day of my marriage, was that he might outlive me. Not that he would murder me—only that he would hang on as tenaciously as a barnacle to see me in the ground, without a penny of his or of my dear, mistreated mother's.

"We never got on, he and I. My sisters were much more awed by him; he turned them against me early. I was fortunate to be sent away to Winchester at nine by my mother's family. And yet"—here he reached a hand to his wife, who took it and squeezed it—"I never doubted, from then to this day, that I loved Letitia. She is the best woman I have ever known, Mr. Lenox, the most steadfast, kindest, happiest—she is my life."

"And if you were to die, the commission would become hers, by army code."

He nodded. "Yes. It was the only way to salvage any money from the disaster of my father's unkindness, following my mother's death. They were never suited to each other. But he was more reasonable in early days, more pious. His flaws were always present—but only in the brief years preceding her death did they predominate, did he become the gnarled, angry person you met."

Lenox nodded, thoughtfully. "Did you feel no guilt about leaving the Grenadiers?"

"There is not much else I have felt in the past four days, Mr. Lenox. The Grens were my brothers; my men, as sons to me. But Letitia must come first, and her life has grown close to intolerable, with no way out of it, no way forward. In three and a half months I could have committed to another five years in the regiment, without a thin penny to support the lifestyle it demands, or I could have sold out my commission, and enriched my father, who needs no enriching, while leaving us destitute—without even this modest home, which the Grenadiers provide."

Lenox nodded. "Yes," he said. "I see the dilemma."

Suddenly Mrs. Austen leaned forward, an urgent look in her eyes, as if for the first time she understood that Lenox was not there to harm them. "Will you help us?" she asked.

Nobody had been hurt. A young love was at stake; two tender hearts.

"Inspector Larchmont's theory is that the French intelligence agencies have abducted your husband. He entertains no other suspicions. Yesterday I wired and told him to hold the corpses that come through Scotland Yard morgue—there are generally seven or eight of these a day, many of them unclothed, or clothed very lightly. Most turn up in the Thames. Few have identifying marks.

"Can you be brave, Mrs. Austen?"

She looked at him curiously. "I can be brave."

"Then you know what you must do. I shall inform Larchmont that my sources have confirmed to that me French intelligence tortured and killed Lieutenant Austen; you go in, choose a body with blond hair, roughly the size and shape of an army officer, and tell them that it is your husband." Lenox rose. "In three days your husband boards a ship."

"Won't someone else claim the body?"

"Nine of ten are never identified, much less claimed."

She looked at him searchingly. "Thank—"

But Lenox still wasn't sure they understood the gravity of the situation. "If you're caught you'll be hanged for desertion, Lieutenant Austen."

"I'm only on leave."

"For another day? They can hang you in the Azores if they wish. Listen to me, since it is now my own neck on the line, too—go to some anonymous hotel in Clapham, Lieutenant. Shave your moustache. It has been the first word in idiocy to conceal yourself here.

"Try not to carry yourself so distinctly as a soldier does. Think of a new name for yourself. And pray for the best. It is not ever, ever, ever as easy to begin a new life as people suspect it is, in my long experience of such endeavors. Here is a five-pound note to pay for the hotel and to get you by. No—I insist. It is Christmas. I'll leave you know. I wish you luck. With any of it on our side, we will never see each other again. Good day, Lieutenant Austen. Good day, Mrs. Austen."

Lenox stood up and touched his hat. Mrs. Austen rose, too. "How can we possibly thank—"

"None of that," said Lenox. "Clapham, and shave, Lieutenant Austen."

He left as quickly and discreetly as he could, huddled under the collar of his overcoat. It had finally started to snow.

Dozens of generations before Lenox was born, the French had begun bottling their wine in what they called *bouteilles*, glass bottles; not long thereafter the cupbearer to the feudal lords was rechristened the *bouteillier*; and at some mysterious moment in the 1500s, the word had crossed the channel and been anglicized: butler.

Kirk, Lenox and Lady Jane's butler, was a passionate expert on the subject of wine, the house's chief cherisher and manager of the cellar. (Lenox himself preferred a whisky and water.) This was one of the two traditional roles the English butler had, along with that of the guardian to the family silver; indeed most butlers slept in a room with the silver safe in it. Of course in these days the job involved a great deal other than these duties, but they were the ones Kirk approached most sacrally.

Lenox finally understood, then, that the Christmas luncheon they were hosting was of great significance, when Kirk approached him and began to ask in grave, precise terms about a certain Médoc he had considered—only considered!—serving that afternoon, produced along the Gironde estuary, and wondering whether Lenox approved or disapproved of the thought, only the thought, not its necessary eventuation, merely the conceptual uncorking of—

"I leave it entirely in your hands, Kirk," said Lenox, to whom it couldn't have been a matter of more profound indifference. "If you think it an occasion for the Médoc, let it be the Médoc."

Kirk, looking gratified, nodded. "I thought so. I really did think so, sir. Let me aerate it immediately, and I will return to apprise you of its nose."

"I can hardly wait."

They had been awoken early that morning, Sophia being permitted on this single day to come into their bedroom before they were quite up; her governess helpless to stop her anyhow.

"It's Christmas!" she shouted in the dim room.

"I doubt it," Lenox had grumbled into his pillow.

"It is!" She was jumping on the bed now. "It's Christmas!"

"It's the loudest Christmas I've experienced yet," Lenox muttered.

"Come downstairs! Come downstairs!"

This was an extremely presumptuous child—in most households in England she would have been smacked and sent to her room without breakfast or presents—but they had only one daughter, and she ruled their hearts.

So they got up and dressed, slowly, and kissed each other happy Christmas in the dim bedroom, and followed the impatient child downstairs. It was just barely seven o'clock; a sharp white light just beginning to emerge in the sky.

The dead tree greeted them, along with (bless Kirk's heart) a standing pot of tea, set nearby. Lenox and Lady Jane poured themselves cups from it as Sophia



sprinted to the chimney. Her stocking was there, and in a holy awe she opened the little presents from it: a comb for her favorite doll, a quince, a wooden whistle that made the sound of a steam-engined train.

She was blissfully happy with these, and watching her made Lenox blissfully happy, though he remained very tired.

The morning passed lazily, snow falling steadily outside. He dozed in his armchair after lunch, with a book and a pipe; finally, when it was nearing two o'clock, he thought that he ought to dress himself. Their first guests would arrive soon.

Lady Jane was in the kitchen, supervising. Sophia was still having her nap. Lenox, who was supposed to be hiding presents in his study for a treasure hunt, was reading the newspaper in his slippers and enjoying a strong drink, his first of the week, with the feeling that he had earned it. Outside the window he could see Hampden Lane—wet rather than white with the snow, garlanded prettily up and down its row of buildings with evergreen wreaths and hangers. In windows there were trees, families, candles; the shops were shut, but many had left chalked messages of the season's greetings hanging in their doors.

There was a knock at the door. It was Edmund, twenty minutes early.

"There you are!" Charles said, beating any of the harried servants to answer it. "Merry Christmas, Edmund."

The brothers shook hands warmly, Edmund closing the door behind him. "Slippers! You're what I call a layabout."

"Come through and see the tree—you won't believe how beautifully it has thrived, after all my naysaying."

Edmund beamed. "Really?"

"Come, look." They went. Sir Edmund's face when he saw the tree, bare as a church in February, fell into dismay. Lenox laughed. "As you can see, we have enough wreaths to commemorate a lost ship, anyhow. Jane brought them in this morning."

"I say, though, I am sorry."

Lenox smiled again. "Come into my study—you can buy me a drink and we'll call it splits."

They followed this plan, Edmund taking his whisky neat. When they were seated in front of the quietly burning fire, each with a drink, Edmund said, "What about Austen?"

Lenox hesitated.

If there was a soul on earth whose discretion he trusted it was his brother's—but then, Jane's, too, Dallington's, Polly's, and if he began to tell this story, the possibility of a mistake multiplied with each person who carried it.

"His wife identified his body this morning, I'm afraid to say."

Edmund grimaced. Larchmont had been satisfied; a closed case, and vague hints at the machinations of French intelligence had settled his opinion of the matter for good. "That's dreadful."

"Indeed. Gambling debts, if I'm not mistaken," said Lenox, borrowing Boothby's story—or rather, what he hoped would not be Boothby's story. "Mrs. Austen is young, at any rate, and from what I hear can expect eleven thousand pounds for her husband's commission, I believe, or thereabouts."

“Little consolation, that, Charles! On Christmas! Money! For shame.”

“Yes,” said Lenox humbly. “You’re quite right.”

“Well, well, what a tale of woe.” Edmund took a sip of his whisky, and in the silence emerged the shadow of his own widowhood, or so at least Charles thought. “Sophia liked her stocking?”

“She did.” Lenox stood up. “Speaking of which—there is already one present for you in that pathetic excuse for a tree that you defrauded us into taking off of your hands, but as it happens I have another for you in here.”

“Do you? I shall ignore that jibe then.”

Lenox left the room, went downstairs into the servant’s quarters, and returned. “What will you say if I tell you I bought it from the baker’s?”

“That it’s a loaf of bread.”

“Guess again. It’s in my jacket pocket here.” There was a ring at the door—first guests! Edmund not counting as a guest. Lenox waved a hand. “Jane will see them. Any thoughts?”

Edmund furrowed his brow. His face was tired. Late hours in Parliament—and traces of that tiredness that had never left it since he lost Molly. “A seedcake?”

“You are very similar to Sophia—obsessed with seedcakes.” These were a Christmas delicacy. “No. Look.”

And from his very small pocket, Lenox brought forth a tiny, minuscule, indeed perhaps the smallest kitten ever to be born. It was a tortoiseshell cat. She was the smallest of the nine the baker’s cat had littered. “Good heavens!”

Lenox went and put her in Edmund’s hands—she fit easily in one of them—and said, “What do you think? You wanted a cat in the year I wanted a rabbit, I recall.”

“I did, that’s true,” said Edmund, who was staring softly at the little creature in his hands. “But this one is the size of a walnut.”

“It will grow into the size of five walnuts before long. Anyhow I saw two mice last time I was at Lenox House.”

“Has she had her milk? Does she have a name?”

“The name I leave to you. Milk—she has had cream, the glutton. Everyone downstairs fell in love with her.”

“She’s a very pretty cat, it’s true. I will have to mull over the name.” He stroked the back of her neck softly. “She is dear, isn’t she,” he murmured, more to himself than to his brother.

There was another knock at the front door. Lenox went over to his desk and took off his slippers, replacing them with his real shoes. “I suppose we’d better go out. She has a box lined with velveteen downstairs.”

“No, I’ll keep her in my pocket,” said Edmund.

Suddenly the study door burst open. With the freedom of the day, Sophia, woken from her nap, had decided to intrude upon her father’s private library.

“Hello Uncle Edmund!” she said. Then, in that flat tone lacking a question mark in which children so often asked questions, she said, “May I please have five seedcakes, father, may I.”

“It’s not Christian in you to want so many, my dear. Two will do.”

“Two,” Sophia said ruminatively. “What about four?”

“What about one?”

“Two will be perfect,” she said. Suddenly she noticed that Edmund was holding the kitten. “I say, what a nice cat!”

“Yes, it’s mine,” Edmund said, smiling.

“May I please pet it?”

“You can name it, if you like. Do you have any ideas?”

“Nicholas,” said Sophia immediately.

“It’s a female,” said Charles.

“No,” said Edmund, “I think it’s a fine name. Nicholas. We’re too hidebound in naming things, I say. Come and pet Nicholas, my dear, but be gentle. She’s only a little particle of a thing.”

The party was loud and happy; the treasure hunt was a disaster; the tree, in having the presents unbound from it, began to lose its structure, shedding whole branches, which was a cause of much hilarity. In an enormous silver bowl there was Jane’s famous hot punch (the secret ingredient was cherry liquor, Lenox happened to know, though she acted very secretive about it even with him) and, as the day went on, it gradually emptied and people grew very jolly indeed.

Sophia made an appearance and ate a seedcake, much feted, before returning to the nursery. The rest of them broke open their own seedcakes—Lenox’s dear friend Graham found the bean in his, which made him the King of Twelfth Night.

“Much honored, I’m sure,” he said, nodding at the applause, smiling in his quiet, private way.

Dallington, who had returned from West Bromwich late the night before, said, “Since the King cannot serve in Parliament, you must quit and come work for the agency.”

“Regretfully declined,” said Graham, and there was a laugh throughout the room.

Jane’s friend Matilda Ludlow played songs on the cottage piano; Lenox’s friend Leigh astonished them by producing a burst of flame from an empty wineglass using only the salt cellar; Lenox’s very old, dear, frail, and white-haired friend Lord Cabot proposed a toast to the Queen’s health; and, in general, it was very much like many other Christmases, in that it was uniquely warm and tender and also warm and tender in the way that those other Christmases were.

And—though perhaps it was the punch—Lenox, surrounded by friends and family, thought that perhaps, after all, this holiday did produce the best in each of them. Why was that? Why, at the coldest time of year, did they return to the warm parts of each other, the parts they could forget in the haste and noise so much of the time, when they were lesser friends, lesser brothers, lesser partners to each other? What spirit made this room so happy? It was a mystery; a mystery beyond even the ken of a very great detective.

As it drew on toward evening they exchanged presents. Lady Jane excelled in this particular art—each of their guests had some small, perfect object bestowed upon them. Lenox himself, less gifted in that direction, did enjoy one moment of triumph.

It was Polly’s present.

“Mine is smaller than anyone else’s,” she said, reaching into the tree to untangle an envelope with a silver bell attached to it, her name painted on it.

“The blame isn’t mine, there,” said Lady Jane. “Your husband sent that over this morning.”

Polly glanced over at Dallington, who remained poker-faced. She opened the envelope and studied it, frowning, before her eyes widened—her first look not at Dallington, but at Lenox.

“Venice!” she said.

When he had sent those three wires after first meeting Mrs. Austen, one of them had been to Dallington in West Bromwich.

***Strongly advise trip to Venice for honeymoon in January STOP Polly at wits’ end STOP listen to a fellow who has been married you fool STOP you can both be easily spared from agency since I am best of three of us STOP all regards Lenox STOP***

Dallington had taken the advice, booking the trip for the sixth of January.

Polly immediately began to throw out objections—chiefly that the business would fall to pieces—but she was grinning, and the objections fell away. She shone with happiness at the prospect of their vacation. Lenox felt unbecomingly pleased with himself.

It was at around 5:40 that Kirk, who from the flush in his face was either very pleased with the reception of the wine he had chosen or had been partaking of it himself, whispered that Lenox had a message.

Lenox, who had just been finishing his pudding, frowned. “A message.”

“By private messenger. A young lady, sir.”

Lenox went to his study and found a letter.

*Dear Mr. Lenox,*

*Thank you for your assistance during this time. I am sorry that the result has not been happier, but you were most kind in your sentiments—I shall not forget your kindness to me. My plans involve emigration; should any new information come to light about my husband’s last days, please contact me by my friend William Saunders, who will provide me a home in Canada, I hope.*

*Thank you again.*

*Abigail Austen*

Lenox sat for some time with the note in his hand, the chatter of the party a background noise.

He thought of the rum fate of all the people he had met in this fleeting case. Those two sisters perched upon their sofa, judging the world, with who knew what in their minds. The Reverend. Austen, who would be on a ship for the Azores in two days. Mrs. Austen, who thought she was being subtle with her deceitful reference to Canada, and showed by mentioning this William Saunders, which Lenox had no doubt that Austen had settled upon as his false name, perhaps didn’t entirely appreciate the danger in which she remained. Boothby, so elegantly in catastrophic debt; the stationmaster at Ipswich with his comically wrongheaded

sense of distance; Polly, Dallington, Sophia, Graham, Leigh, the Duke and Duchess of Marchmain, all of them, Kirk, Jane, Cabot; Larchmont, with his large family and the beef suet in his hair; the colonel of the Grenadiers, probably sitting up late over regimental papers.

The sheer numerousness of humans. How fortunate he was among them.

He tore Letitia Austen's letter into small pieces, but remained at his desk, wondering what life she would build alongside her husband as Mrs. William Saunders, with their eleven thousand pounds. There were small portraits of his mother and father hanging on the wall nearby, painted on ivory, and he looked at them.

What serious, decent, loving people they had been! Dead now these twenty years and more.

He wondered how he would be remembered twenty years after his own death.

From the top drawer of his desk he took his book of checks and wrote a draft on his account for three hundred pounds. That would be three times her annual salary, more than enough for permanent escape. He folded it in a piece of paper, then put this in an envelope and wrote on it *Annie, Housekeeper Middleman Hall, Ipswich, Suffolk*, then added, underneath, *to be delivered by hand to recipient only*, which would cost another threepence.

Money well spent, that.

He glanced out the window. Snow! It had begun to stick at last, turning the streets a single color, erasing under its whiteness the modernity of life, returning the world to its most basic shapes.

He stared for a while, contemplative but not wholly unhappy. At last he stood up. His guests would be eating the oranges Lady Jane had ordered. He sealed the envelope, put it in the rack of letters to go out the next morning, and went back to the party, forgetting almost immediately, amid their jolly chatter and the music of the piano, this melancholy interlude, and instead plunging back into the company of those he loved, happy, content, a little inebriated, and certainly overfull, just as one should on Christmas: as fat as a Lenox goose.

