

The Bernini Bust



Iain Pears

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HARPER

To Dick

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Author's Note

Some of the buildings and paintings in this book exist, others do not, and all the characters are imaginary. There is an Italian art squad in a building in central Rome. However, I have arbitrarily shifted its affiliation from the carabinieri to the polizia, to underline that my account bears no relation to the original.

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Jonathan Argyll lay contentedly on a large slab of Carrara marble, soaking up the mid-morning sun, smoking a cigarette and considering the infinite variety of life. He was not a sun-worshipper – far from it – he was quite proud of his ultraviolet-free complexion, but needs must, despite the risk of wrinkles; his temporary colleagues looked upon his packet of cigarettes with all the approval of vampires presented with a clove of garlic and were prepared to cite innumerable Los Angeles County Clean Air Acts to force him into the open when his nerves required reassurance and sustenance.

He didn't mind really, although all that moral fervour in such a confined space occasionally made him feel claustrophobic. He would be at the Moresby Museum for only a few days and his stock of moral relativism would last. The when-in-Rome syndrome. A bit longer and he would no doubt be reduced to hanging round the toilets, blowing smoke into air-conditioning vents. But he could survive for a few days.

So he was frequently to be found wandering down the highly expensive, mahogany-coated stairs through the vast brass and glass doors and into the gentle warmth of California in early summer. And then on to his favourite slab where he performed the joint exercise of having his smoke, watching the world go by, and obscuring the letters which announced to the passerby – not that there were many, this being a part of the world where legs now served mainly a decorative function – that the Arthur M. Moresby Museum of Fine Art was located in the building behind him (9–5 weekdays, 10–4 weekends).

Ahead of him lay what he had come to accept as an almost typical Los Angeles townscape. A broad swathe of luxuriously tended grass – kept going by water piped nearly a thousand miles and then sprinkled in a fine mist – separated the white concrete museum building and the adjacent administrative block from the street. Palm trees sprouted everywhere, doing little but sway in the light wind. Cars drove with painful slowness up and down the wide boulevard ahead. From his well-placed vantage point Argyll could see everything but, apart from himself, there was not another living person visible.

Not that he was paying much attention to the street, the weather or even the palm trees. Life in general was much more on his mind, and beginning to get him down a bit. Success; that was what his presence on the lump of marble signified, and a very mixed blessing it was proving to be. He did his best to look on the bright side; he had, after all, just successfully unloaded a Titian for a client on to the museum behind him for an outrageous sum of money, of which he (or rather his employer) would collect 8.25 per cent. Better still, he had done almost nothing whatever to earn it. A man called Langton had turned up in Rome and said he wanted to buy. Simple as that. Apparently the Moresby considered itself a little short on sixteenth-century Venetian and wanted something by Titian to reinforce its credentials.

Argyll, quick on his feet for about the first time in his professional life, asked for a grossly inflated sum to start off the bargaining. To his immense astonishment, this Langton man had squinted, nodded and said, 'Fine. Cheap at the price.' More money than sense, evidently, but who was Argyll to complain? Not even any haggling. Pleased though he was, he still felt slightly let down. People should bargain; it was only proper.

The whole sale went through at such lightning speed he was left breathless. Within two days a contract had turned up. All the normal business of examining and testing and humming and hawing was dispensed with. However, one of the terms of the sale was that the picture should be delivered to the museum free of charge, and that Argyll should be on hand to witness the authentication process – provenance checking, scientific tests, and so on – with museum staff. If there was any dissatisfaction he would have to take the thing back. More to the point, it was strict payment on delivery – or rather acceptance.

As a point of principle he had protested about this, making vague complaints about honour and gentlemen and the like. No deal. The terms were invariable and set by the owner who, in forty years of collecting, had learnt not to trust an art dealer further than he could throw one. In his heart, Argyll sympathised. Besides, the important thing was to get his hands on the cheque. Essentially, he would have dressed up in Greek national costume and sung sea shanties in a public place if that was what they wanted. Times were hard in the art business.

He had arrived a few days back, alarming the museum staff by bearing the small picture wrapped up in a supermarket bag and transported as hand luggage on the aircraft. It was firmly removed from his care, encased in an especially designed wood and velvet box weighing an extraordinary amount, and carried in an armourplated wagon from the airport to the museum, where a team of six began to study it and another three considered where it might best be hung. Argyll was impressed. He thought one person with a hammer and nail would have done the trick well enough.

But it was the consequences of the sale that bothered him, and cooled off the warm glow of affluent well-being that should, ordinarily, have suffused him. If there was one thing worse than an unhappy employer, it was a happy one, it seemed...His thoughts returned yet again to the unwelcome generosity of Sir Edward Byrnes, proprietor of the Bond Street gallery bearing his name, and Jonathan Argyll's employer. But, as he knew that no satisfactory decision was likely to result from thinking any more about Byrnes' offer – instruction, rather – that he return to London after nearly three years in Italy, he was not completely disappointed to be interrupted by the sight of a cab pulling slowly off the street, driving along the driveway of carefully laid, hand-fired terracotta tiles, through the mist keeping the lawn in fine fettle, and finally stopping outside the museum entrance.

The man who emerged was tall, excessively thin and had a carefully cultivated air of aristocratic fastidiousness combined with just a suggestion of aesthetic flair. The first side was indicated by the immaculately fitted suit and watchchain crossing his stomach; the second by a handsome ebony and gold walking stick in his right hand and a lilac handkerchief in his breast pocket.

As the taxi drew away, this man stood still and gazed imperiously about him, very much with the air of someone faintly surprised not to see the full welcoming committee that must be around somewhere. He also looked distinctly annoyed, and Argyll sighed heavily. His day was spoilt already.

It was much too late to escape. The man's gaze, having little else to alight on, fixed on him and Argyll saw the look of recognition spread over the ageing but still handsomely chiselled face.

'Hello, Hector,' Argyll said, accepting the inevitable, but refusing to show any form of welcome by budging from his marble slab. 'You're the last person I expected to see here.'

Hector di Souza, a Spanish art dealer resident in Rome for longer than anyone could remember, walked over and saluted the Englishman with a well-practised wave of the walking stick.

'In that case, I have the advantage,' he said smoothly. 'I fully expected to see you. Although not of course, in such a languorous posture. I trust you're enjoying your stay?'

That, of course, was Hector all over. Stick him at the North Pole and he'd act as though he owned the place. Argyll tried to think of a suitably cutting reply, but inspiration failed him, as usual. So he

yawned, leant over and stubbed out his cigarette in an inconspicuous corner of the marble.

– Fortunately di Souza neither wanted nor waited for a reply. Instead, he resumed his gaze around the landscape, looking with right eyebrow delicately raised to indicate a somewhat contemptuous disapproval of American urbanism. Eventually his eye came to rest on the museum itself, and he sniffed loudly in a fashion that was utterly damning.

‘This is a museum?’ he asked, squinting at the bland and anonymous building behind Argyll’s left shoulder.

‘For the time being. They plan to build a bigger one.’

‘Tell me, dear boy, is it as bad as they say?’

Argyll shrugged. ‘Depends what you mean. By bad, that is. The truly disinterested might say it’s full of tat. But as it’s just shelled out a large amount of money for one of my pictures, I am honourbound to defend it. But I think they could have spent the money better.’

‘They just have, my dear, they just have,’ he said with quite unbearable self-satisfaction. ‘Twelve of the finest pieces of Graeco-Roman sculpture on the market.’

‘Provided by yourself, I suppose? How old are they? Fifty years? Or did you have them carved to order?’

Argyll’s sarcasm was perhaps a little heavy-handed, but to his mind it was perfectly excusable. Not one of the biggest rogues prowling the Roman art market, di Souza was at least one of the more consistent. Not that people didn’t like him; far from it. Admittedly, some had trouble with the way he would come over all a-quiver at the very sight of an aristocrat; others found his baroque gallantry with women (the richer the better) annoying. But, on the whole, once you got used to the arrogance, the affected accent and his uncanny inability to find his wallet whenever a bill for a meal arrived, he was quite good company. If you like that sort of thing.

The only trouble was he could never resist the opportunity to make money, and a naïve and inexperienced Argyll had once come into his sights. Not serious, really; a little matter of an Etruscan figurine (fifth-century BC) cast in bronze a matter of weeks before Argyll was persuaded to buy it. It is difficult to forgive that sort of thing. Di Souza had taken it back – more than he had ever done for a real client – and apologised, and taken him out for a meal in recompense, but Argyll still nursed a certain grievance over the affair. The man had, after all, forgotten his wallet that time as well.

Hence his scepticism, and di Souza’s wish to brush the matter aside.

‘Selling things to you is one thing; selling things to old man Moresby is another,’ he said airily. ‘I’ve been trying to catch him for decades. Now I have, I don’t want to lose him again. The stuff I’ve sent here is perfectly genuine. And I’d much prefer it if you didn’t start casting aspersions on my integrity. Especially considering the favour I’ve done you.’

Argyll regarded him sceptically. ‘And what favour is that?’

‘You got that Titian off your hands at last, didn’t you? Well, you’ve me to thank. That man Langton asked about you, and I gave you a marvellous write-up. Of course, a recommendation from myself carries considerable weight in the more knowledgeable quarters. I told him your Titian was superb, that you were a man of great integrity. And here you are,’ di Souza concluded with a broad sweep of the cane around the landscape which implied strongly that he had personally called it into being.

Privately, Argyll considered that a recommendation from di Souza was no great favour, but let it pass. At least it partly cleared up the point of how Langton had come to him. He’d wondered about that.

‘So,’ di Souza went on, ‘your career in Italy is now on a much more secure footing. You may

thank me later.'

~~Certainly not, Argyll thought. Besides, it looked like his career in Italy was drawing to a close, and he rather resented di Souza for reminding him.~~

How could he refuse Byrnes' offer? The art market hadn't collapsed entirely, but it was shaky round the edges and even a well-established figure like Byrnes was having to draw in his horns. He needed his best personnel on hand to advise him, so someone, either Argyll or his opposite number in Vienna, was going to be summoned back to London. The sale of the Titian made him choose Argyll. It was a gratifying show of confidence.

But – and it was a big but – to leave Italy? Go back to England? The very idea made him miserable.

The same thoughts again. Di Souza's garrulousness was proving useful for the first time in their acquaintance, taking his mind off matters.

'It's a fairly new place, isn't it?' he was saying, impervious to Argyll's inattention. 'Can't say I'm all that impressed.'

'Nor is anyone else. That's the trouble. Arthur Moresby spent so much money and this is all he gets for it.'

'Poor man,' said di Souza sympathetically.

'Indeed. I'm sure it must be terrible. So now they think it's not grand enough to stand comparison with the Getty. They're on the brink of an all-out construction war. You know the Getty Museum is a replica of the Villa dei Papyri at Herculaneum?'

Di Souza nodded.

'This lot are thinking of building a full-size copy of Diocletian's Palace at Split. About the size of the Pentagon, as far as I can see, but more expensive. According to rumour, you'll be able to put the entire Louvre in the thing, and still have enough room left to throw the Olympic Games.'

Di Souza rubbed his hands together. 'And they'll have to fill it, dear boy. How splendid! I got here just in the nick of time. When do they start building?'

Argyll tried to dampen his enthusiasm. 'Don't get too keen. I gather they've got to get Moresby to sign on the dotted line. And he's not someone who's used to being hurried along. Still, you may meet the architect. He wanders around with a fanatical look in his eye all the time, muttering to himself. He's a sort of guru of what he terms the post-modern return to classical tradition. His roofs leak. Awful charlatan.'

Argyll had by this time reconciled himself to di Souza's company, and they walked over the law together so that the Spaniard could present himself to the appropriate authority. He was still plainly irritated that there had been no one to meet him at the airport.

'What about these priceless objects of yours?' Argyll asked as they ignored the whistles and shouts of a guardian telling them to get off the grass. 'Where are they?'

'Oh, at the airport. They arrived a couple of days ago, I gather. But you know what customs people are like. Same the world over. It's all on account of the other pieces I brought over.'

'What other pieces?'

'Langton's. He's been buying stuff all over the place. Nothing important, I gather, but he wanted to get some of it back here. So he asked me to arrange shipment for him. Another healthy fee, and a satisfied customer. One should always be happy to oblige a man with access to so much money, don't you think?'

Still in an effusive mood, Hector babbled on, hopping from topic to topic with the agility of a mountain goat. He bumbled away about his important clients – all nonsense as Argyll knew; Hector's

career had always been more style than substance – and eventually broke off to point at a small figure emerging from the office block and heading in their direction. ‘So this place is inhabited, after all,’ he said. ‘Who’s that odd little man over there?’

‘That’s the museum director. Samuel Thanet. Pleasant enough, but the anxious type. Hello, Mr Thanet,’ he continued, switching to English as the man came into earshot. ‘How are you? Enjoying life?’ It is always a good idea to be nice to museum directors, especially if they command an acquisitions budget bigger than all of Italy’s museums rolled together. In this, at least, he and di Souza had a common outlook.

In making the characterisation Argyll was accurate, but a little unfair. If Samuel Thanet looked worried, it was mainly because he had a great deal to be worried about. It is not easy being in charge of a museum, but when it is owned and run in an almost medieval fashion by a man used to having his every whim treated like a heavenly command, life can become well nigh intolerable.

Not that Thanet bore any resemblance to the archetypal laid-back Californian even on his days off. Instead of the tall, lean, sun-tanned, jogging type the outside world is convinced lives in the area, Thanet was short, overweight, much given to highly formal clothes and was restrained to the point of neurosis. He was not one to waste energy on tennis or surfing; such as he had was divided equally between worrying and an almost fanatical devotion to his museum.

For which latter occupation he needed money, and for that he needed to be appallingly sycophantic to the museum’s patron and owner. There is nothing unusual about this; all museum directors have to be sycophantic to someone, be it patrons, donors or boards of governors. It’s part of the job; some might say the most important part. And everybody else in the museum has to be sycophantic to the director. By the time you make it to the top, you are well practised in the art.

Even for the practised courtier, however, Arthur M. Moresby II was a bit of a handful. It wasn’t just a question of telling him how wonderful he was; he knew that already. It was a given, like the sun rising, or the income tax form arriving. Rather, Moresby had whims. For a start, he was a businessman, and liked reality to be presented in terms of development concepts and budgeting proposals. Next he liked those around him to be lean, mean and hungry. And however ambitious Thanet might be for his museum, he was far from lean, could occasionally be mean, but was utterly hopeless at appearing hungry. It made him nervous, and the prospect of an encounter with the great man turned him into a chronic insomniac for weeks ahead.

‘I’m afraid I’m having to deal with several crises simultaneously at the moment,’ he said in reply to the question, sneezed loudly, and whipped out a handkerchief too late. He blew his nose and looked apologetic. Allergies, he said. Martyr to them.

‘Really? I haven’t noticed any crises. By the way, may I introduce Señor di Souza? He’s arrived with your new sculptures.’

The comment, innocent enough, clearly added another crisis to Thanet’s mental checklist. His brow furrowed mightily and he eyed di Souza with considerable alarm.

‘What new sculptures?’ he said.

This was more than di Souza’s ego could bear. Being ostentatiously ignored was one thing; at least that indicated people knew you were around. But to have Thanet appear genuinely oblivious of his existence was too much. In a clipped and stern voice, marred only by his limited English vocabulary, he explained his presence. Thanet looked even more irritated, although it appeared to be the content of the message, not the style of its delivery, which alarmed him.

‘That infernal man Langton again. He really has no right to cut across established procedures like this,’ he muttered.

‘You *must* have known I was coming...’ di Souza began, but Thanet cut him off.

‘What, exactly, have you brought with you?’ he demanded.

‘Three cases of Roman sculpture, provided by myself, and one case brought for Mr Langton.’

‘And what’s in that?’

‘I’ve no idea. Don’t you know?’

‘If I knew I wouldn’t ask, would I?’

Di Souza looked perplexed. All he’d done was arrange shipment, he said. He assumed it was other bits of sculpture.

‘It’s like trying to run a madhouse,’ Thanet confided to nobody in particular, shaking his head in disbelief.

‘Do you really give your agents free run to buy things? What about my Titian? Did Langton buy that on a whim as well?’

Thanet shifted from foot to foot, then decided to unburden himself. ‘It’s Mr Moresby, I’m afraid,’ he said. ‘He often decides to buy things on his own account, and instructs people like Langton to go ahead. Then they turn up here.’

What he meant, and couldn’t bring himself to say, was that, in the past, he had found his employer and benefactor’s judgement in artistic matters to be a little shaky. An alarming number of pictures in the museum were there partly because Mr Moresby was convinced he could spot a masterwork which the dealers, curators and historians of several dozen countries had unaccountably overlooked. And partly for other reasons. There was one picture, and Thanet shuddered involuntarily every time he thought of it, which had almost certainly been painted in the 1920s, probably in London.

But Mr Moresby had been persuaded it was by Frans Hals when he bought it eighteen months previously, and Frans Hals it was still labelled. Thanet couldn’t think of it without remembering the occasion he was walking through the gallery, past a little knot of visitors, and had heard one of them snickering as he read the description. Nor could he forget the awful row that erupted when a junior curator produced proof that the thing was a dud. The Frans Hals was still there; the junior curator wasn’t.

‘In both of your cases,’ he said, pushing such thoughts aside, ‘I’m afraid museum procedure was bypassed. It’s no good, you know. Not professional. I shall have to talk to Mr Moresby – again – when he comes this evening.’

Commercial instincts pricked up their metaphorical ears here. This was the first mention of an impending visit by Moresby himself, a figure legendary in equal parts for his excessive wealth, prodigality in art collecting and singular unpleasantness.

‘He’s coming here?’ they said almost in unison. Thanet looked at them, knowing exactly what was passing at high speed through their minds.

‘Yes. We’re having to arrange a party at short notice. You’re both invited, I suppose. You can make up numbers.’

A bit graceless, but the man was under pressure. Argyll ignored it.

‘Panic in the ranks, eh?’

Thanet nodded sombrely. ‘That’s it, I’m afraid. He likes surprising us with this sort of thing. I’m told he’s constantly dropping in at short notice at his factories to see how things are run. Always fires someone, *pour encourager les autres*. So I suppose we can count ourselves lucky we have some warning, even if only a few hours.’ He sniffled once more, and the two visitors took a step backwards to avoid being caught in the blast. After dithering for some time, Thanet decided not to sneeze after all, and wiped his teary eyes instead. He sighed in a rheumy fashion and sniffed heavily. ‘I do hate the

time of year,' he said confidentially.

~~'It could be worse,' he went on. 'We're just going to give him a reception, then a tour of the museum. And I think there will be an important announcement to justify our efforts.'~~ He looked suddenly smug as he said it, very much like someone nursing a delightful secret.

'I should be delighted to come, thank you,' said Argyll. Not that he liked parties particularly, but if the room was going to be positively strewn with billionaires, he couldn't afford to miss it. Even a measly multi-millionaire would satisfy. Doesn't do to be fussy.

He was about to make careful enquiries about the guest list when he was interrupted by a semi-sniffle of alarm from Thanet, who whipped out his handkerchief once more and gave a convincing impression of trying to hide behind it.

The focus of his anxiety was a small, brown-haired woman whose immaculately constructed elegance was marred only by a face of steadfast and determined hardness. Early middle-age, but fighting back with the best technology money could buy. She had driven up to the museum in a vast car and was now heading their way.

'Damnation,' said Thanet, turning to confront the menace.

'Samuel Thanet. I want a word with you,' she called as she marched across the lawn, giving the luckless gardener a nasty look as he started to protest once more.

Her eyes swept across the assembled company with all the warmth of a high-pressure water-hose. 'What piece of chicanery have you pulled off this time?'

'Oh, Mrs Moresby...' Thanet said desperately, giving the others the only introduction they ever received.

'Oh, Mrs Moresby,' she mimicked in an unappealing fashion. 'Stop whingeing. What I want to know is,' she paused for dramatic effect and pointed an accusing finger at him, 'what in God's name are you up to now?'

Thanet stared at her in bewilderment. 'What?' he said in surprise. 'I don't know what...'

'You know very well what. You've been bamboozling my husband again.'

Di Souza, always adverse to being left out of conversations with handsome and vastly wealthy women, spotted his opportunity. 'What does bamboozling mean?' he asked, smiling in the way which he firmly believed, normally made hearts flutter.

Mrs Moresby added him to her list of people who deserved looks of withering contempt. 'Bamboozling,' she said slowly but rather nastily. 'From bamboozle. Verb. To defraud. To corrupt. To pull the wool over the eyes of sweet, trusting old men. To buy, in other words, stolen or otherwise illegally acquired works of art for the purposes of egotistical self-aggrandisement. That's what bamboozling means. And this stumpy little creep,' she said, pointing at Thanet in case there was any doubt, 'is the arch bamboozler. Got it?'

Di Souza nodded slowly, having failed to understand what on earth she was talking about. 'Yes, perfectly, thank you,' he said in what he always considered to be his most charming fashion. Highly reliable usually, and the prop on which he had built an old but deserved reputation for irresistibility, singularly failed to work its magic on Anne Moresby.

'Good,' said Mrs Moresby. 'Now keep your nose out of this.'

Di Souza drew himself up in dignified protest. 'Madam, please...'

'Ah, shut up.' She cut him dead and directed her full attention at Thanet. 'Your grasping ambition for this museum is out of hand. I'm warning you, if you keep on manipulating my husband, when he comes this evening you are going to pay a very heavy price indeed. So you watch yourself.' She poked him in the chest for emphasis.

She did an abrupt about-turn and marched back across the lawn. Didn't even say goodbye. In the background the gardener threw up his hands in despair and, as soon as the car swept back out into the street, came across to examine the damage.

Thanet watched her go impassively. He almost looked pleased.

'What on earth was that all about?' Argyll asked in astonishment.

Thanet shook his head and declined the invitation to hand out confidences. 'Oh, it's a long story Mrs Moresby likes to take on the role of the dutiful wife protecting her husband from the outside world. And looking after her own interests into the bargain. I'm very much afraid she likes to practise on me. It may well indicate that Mr Moresby will indeed be making an important announcement tonight.'

Clearly, much remained unsaid here, but Argyll had no opportunity to pursue the matter. Thanet fended off further questions, apologised profusely for the unorthodox way in which di Souza had been welcomed, and sniffled his way off to the solitary splendour of his office in the administrative block. The two Europeans watched him go in silence.

'Can't say I'd like his job,' Argyll ventured after a pause.

'I don't know,' di Souza said. 'Whatever Moresby's faults, I have heard that he pays well. Are you going to go this evening?'

Argyll nodded. 'Seems so.'

Di Souza waved his hand dismissively. 'Good. The place will probably be littered with artistically starved wealth. All wanting genuine works of art imported direct from Europe. Could make your career, if you oil your way around the clientele properly. And mine, come to think of it. If I can only unload my stock on some of them I'll be able to retire a happy man. I just hope that dreadful woman won't be there.'

'The trouble is, I've never been very good at parties...'

Di Souza tut-tutted. 'You're the only art dealer I know who feels embarrassed about selling things to people. You must get over this disgusting reticence, you know. I know it's the mark of an English gentleman but it's bad news here. The hard sell, my boy. That's what's needed. Get the bit between your teeth, the wind in your sails, the eye on the ball...'

'And trip up?'

'And make money.'

Argyll looked shocked. 'I'm most surprised to hear you talking in such blatantly materialistic terms. And you an aesthete, too.'

'Even aesthetes must eat. In fact, we spend a fortune on food, because we're so fussy. That's why we're such expensive friends. Come now, this is your big chance.'

'But I've just sold a Titian...' Argyll protested, feeling his professional acumen was being called into question a little.

Di Souza looked unconvinced. 'Many a slip,' he said supportively, and Argyll glared at him. The last thing he needed at the moment was something else to worry about. 'After all, you've not cashed the cheque yet.'

'I haven't even got the cheque yet.'

'There you are. It's amazing the things that can go wrong. Take Moresby, now. I remember, just after the war...'

Argyll did not want to hear. 'That Titian is as sold as you can get,' he said firmly. 'Don't go around putting ideas into people's heads.'

'Oh, very well,' di Souza replied, annoyed to be interrupted in mid-anecdote. 'If you restrain

yourself over my sculpture. All I was trying to say is that the good dealer never misses an opportunity. Think how much your stock will rise with Byrnes if you unload something else while you're here.'

'My stock is quite high already, thank you,' Argyll said primly. 'I've been asked to go back to London. Perhaps become a partner.'

Di Souza was impressed, as well he might be. Argyll, after all, left out the bit that it was more of an order than a request, and the result of a cutback rather than a promotion.

'You're leaving Rome? I thought you were settled permanently.'

That, of course, was the rub. Argyll had also thought he was settled permanently. But it seemed that, in reality, he had no real ties to the place at all. Not when it came to the test.

He shrugged miserably. Like Thanet, he was not in a confiding mood at the moment. Di Souza, ever insensitive, assumed he was thinking about money.

For all Argyll's misgivings, the party was an impressive affair, especially for a scratch effort. However nasty an employer Moresby might be, clearly parties were an area where blank cheques ruled. And whatever the inadequacies of the museum itself at least its entrance lobby was a good place for a bash. Centre stage was a vast table covered in ice and half an ocean full of miscellaneous shellfish; nibbles there were aplenty; a jazz band blasted away in one corner, a string quintet in another, to emphasise the museum's mission to unify high and popular culture. No one paid much attention to either. The drink situation, while not generous, was adequate if you worked at it.

In short supply, however, were all those multi-millionaires slavering at the chops to buy up Argyll's small (but select) stock of goods. Perhaps they were there and he just didn't know how to spot them. You couldn't, after all, just sidle up to someone and ask for a quick peek at their bank statement, though some people did seem to have a sixth sense for this sort of thing: Edward Byrnes instinctively headed towards people with excess cash burning a hole in their pockets. Argyll had never worked out how he did it. Nor had he ever grasped how to manipulate a conversation so that it imperceptibly came round to the question of, say, nineteenth-century French landscapes. Of which, by chance, you happened to have a fine example...

On his own little ventures into this complicated territory he generally found himself trying to sell Flemish genre pieces to waiters. When he did manage to latch on to the right person, he ended up demonstrating at length how his pictures weren't really that good, and recommending something currently owned by a rival.

So it was this evening. Almost subliminally, he managed to convey the notion that he found the idea of selling something faintly distasteful. While he had the distinct impression that Hector di Souza was unloading his fakes on every wealthy woman in the area, Argyll scarcely even managed to tell anyone he had anything to sell. His one substantial conversation was with the architect, a flamboyantly casual man with a pronounced tendency to middle-age spread, who lectured him on the synthesis of modernist utilitarianism and the classicist aesthetic as expressed in his own *oeuvre*. To put it another way, he talked about himself non-stop for twenty minutes. The fact that he was one of those people who constantly look over your right shoulder for someone more interesting didn't make him any more endearing.

But the conversation was not entirely without interest: in a fit of self-satisfaction, the architect confided that this was a big evening for him. Old man Moresby had finally committed himself to the Big Museum (known to all staff as the BM), and was going to announce it tonight. Hence the panic, hence the sudden visit, hence Thanet's vague air of smugness to counter the more general worry, and hence, presumably, Anne Moresby's pre-emptive strike a few hours earlier.

'The biggest private museum commission for decades,' he said with excusable satisfaction. 'It's going to cost a bomb.'

'How much is a bomb?' asked Argyll, who loved hearing of other people's folly.

'The fabric alone will be about 300 million.'

'Dollars?' Argyll squeaked, appalled at the very thought.

‘Of course. What do you think? Lire?’

‘Dear God. He must be crazy.’

The architect looked upset that anyone might query the idea of entrusting him with so much money. ‘Museums are the temples of the modern age,’ he intoned sonorously. ‘They enshrine all that’s beautiful and worth preserving in our culture.’

Argyll gazed at him quizzically, trying to discern whether he was joking. He came to the depressing conclusion that the man was serious. ‘Bit pricey, though,’ he objected.

‘You have to pay for the best,’ the architect insisted.

‘And that’s you?’

‘Of course. I am by far the most significant architect of my generation. Perhaps of any generation,’ he added modestly.

‘But doesn’t he have anything better to spend it on?’

Evidently for the first time, the architect considered the possibility for a moment. ‘No,’ he said firmly after a while. ‘If he abandoned the museum, everything would go to his godawful son. Or his godawful wife. If they weren’t so dreadful, I doubt this project would ever have got off the ground.’

Then he saw a more important person on the other side of the room and whisked himself off. Argyll, offended at being abandoned but relieved he was left alone, shot like a bullet in the direction of the drinks section to recover himself.

Business was not brisk; the waiter had a slight air of under-employment. One person, however – and Argyll warmed to him the moment he saw him pointing a shaky finger at the whisky – seemed to be doing his best to make the poor soul feel wanted.

‘Great,’ said this stranger, a man in his late thirties with long fair hair of an antique cut. ‘Though I was the only person here drinking something other than Perrier. What you having?’

This wasn’t so generous, considering all the drinks were free, but as an invitation to conversation it was adequate. Argyll refilled and they leant back on the table, companionably side-by-side, and watched the world go by.

‘Who’re you?’ the man asked. Argyll explained. ‘Thought I’d not seen you around before,’ he said. ‘You here to unload fakes and curios on my old man?’

Argyll was both affronted and intrigued in equal measure. This, it seemed, was Arthur M. Moresby III, known as Jack, although he did not know why. So he asked. Jack Moresby looked pained.

‘To distinguish me from my father. My middle name, I hate to say, is Melisser.’

‘Melissa?’

‘Melisser. My mother’s maiden name. Father reckoned that being his son gave me too many advantages, so he thought he’d give me something to struggle against. You know, he sort of thought that being beaten up at school for having a cissy name would give me an edge.’

‘Goodness.’

‘Yeah. I can’t be called Arthur, as I refuse to be mistaken for him, and being someone who drinks a pint of whisky a day, I naturally can’t accept being called Melisser. Jack seems more writerish, I reckon.’

‘You write books?’

‘Just said so, didn’t I?’

A direct manner, just this side of being rude. Argyll began to understand why he was not held in high esteem by architects and people like that. To change the subject he assured him that he did not sell fakes. He was here to deliver a small but exquisite piece of unquestioned value.

Jack was not convinced, but seemed content to let it pass. Argyll asked if he spent much time at

the museum. He nearly choked on his whisky and said he would ordinarily not be seen dead in the place.

‘Look at this bunch,’ he exclaimed, sweeping his arm across to include the entire room. ‘Have you ever seen such a collection of creeps gathered into a room before? Eh? What you think?’

Legally, this is known as a leading question and was one which required a careful answer. Besides, as Argyll could assure him, in his line of business a whole room full of creeps was nothing unusual. Who else was he meant to sell his pictures to?

Jack conceded the point, and refilled. Argyll proffered a bowl of peanuts by way of return. Jack shook his head. Never touched them. The salt made his ankles swell up. Argyll regarded the peanuts with new respect. Which creeps did he have in mind, in particular? he asked, pointing out that, being new to the country, he was not so good at spotting them yet.

So junior gave a quick guided tour. He was surprisingly knowledgeable, considering that he said he avoided his family and its associates as much as possible.

Samuel Thanet, he said, pointing ostentatiously to the director, who had been cruising around the room being hospitable ever since they got there. He had a very definite party technique: regulation of minute of conversation then on to the next person. Some people do this well, but not Thanet; he managed to make everything seem an unwelcome chore. Not surprising, really, Jack commented. Thanet didn’t really care about people; he was wedded to the idea of going down as founder of the greatest private museum in North America. Using other people’s money, of course. Mousy, quiet, nervous, but utterly poisonous. A man who would never do a mean trick – as long as he could get someone else to do it for him.

‘Look at him there,’ he said. ‘All tweedily a-twitter, waiting for my father to turn up so he can give his boots a good lick.’

The characterisation seemed a little unfair. Argyll was prepared to agree about the mousy and nervous side, but so far at least had seen nothing resembling venom. On the other hand, he was prepared to admit he did not know the man very well. In any case, his technique clearly worked, whatever it was, if Moresby was on the verge of shelling out over \$300 million on a new museum.

Jack didn’t seem very impressed. ‘You don’t know my father,’ he said. ‘I’ll believe in this new museum when I’m invited to the opening ceremony.’

He got tired of contemplating the director and moved on. ‘James Langton,’ he said, pointing at the white-linen-clad man in his late fifties who had been so gratifyingly keen on Titian. ‘English slimebag.’

Argyll raised an eyebrow.

‘Sorry. But you know what I mean. Supercilious, disdainful, mocking, dishonest. Wouldn’t you say those are national characteristics?’

‘Not really,’ Argyll said, a host of English people fitting that description swarming into his mind.

‘Well, I do. Used to be chief leech, until Thanet came along. Since then he’s become an international parasite. Paris, Rome, London, New York, as they say on the perfume bottles. Devoted himself to searching out every overpriced fake in the world for my father’s collection, buying it and taking a hefty cut for his services.’

Argyll felt aggrieved, and mentioned his Titian once more. He was beginning to develop a complex about it.

‘So we all make mistakes,’ Jack said with no discernible interest. ‘Even a man of Langton’s huge talent couldn’t get a hundred per cent success rate. He must slip occasionally and buy something genuine.’

On he went. ‘Mummy dearest,’ he said, pointing at the petite, expertly dressed woman Argyll had encountered earlier that afternoon. She had arrived twenty minutes earlier. ‘She’s my stepmother, but she doesn’t like to be called that. On the make. Quite assiduous about it. She has a vague southern accent but in fact comes from Nebraska. Do you know where Nebraska is?’

Argyll confessed he didn’t. Jack nodded as though this proved it.

‘Nor does anybody else. She hit the jackpot with my old man, and will stick with him until he croaks and she can get her hands on his money. Unless the museum gets it first.’ He regarded the woman with apparent indulgence, then dismissed her abruptly from his mind and switched to another target.

‘David Barclay,’ he said firmly, pointing to an excessively groomed personage talking to Anne Moresby. ‘His signature will be on your cheque – if you ever get it. My father’s lawyer and personal factotum, on permanent secondment from some law firm. The *éminence grise* of the family. Handsome little bastard, don’t you think? The sort that works out before going to the office. So many designer labels on him he resembles the advertising section of *Vogue*. Drop him in a sewage plant and shit would become fashionable. My father,’ he went on in a loud stage-whisper, breathing a whisky fragrance into Argyll’s face from close range, ‘is a bit of a sucker for up-and-coming professional types. That’s why I’m such a disappointment to him. He can’t resist someone like Barclay. Nor can my beloved stepmother.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Argyll said, caught a little by surprise.

‘Little David is connected to my family most intimately,’ Jack said, speaking ever more loudly. ‘All services, legal and otherwise, rendered with equal skill.’

He sniggered, and Argyll regarded the lawyer with increased interest. He expressed surprise that the man kept his job.

‘Discretion is a wonderful thing. The trouble is, it’s not that easy to keep up. Even the best-kept secret is apt to leak out eventually. Given a helping hand, anyway. That’s why I’m here, in fact,’ Jack went on elliptically. ‘I love firework displays, and are we going to have one tonight.’

‘Are we, indeed?’ Argyll said, thinking that perhaps this party might turn out to be more fun than he’d anticipated. ‘You don’t seem to rate your father’s judgement of character very highly.’

‘Me? The grateful son, not respect one of the richest men in the world? I have the highest opinion of his judgement. After all, he spotted me immediately as a drunken, ill-disciplined bum who’d never make a go of anything. And I can assure you, he was right. I have never disappointed him in the slightest.’

There were distinct signs by this stage that Jack was teetering on the brink of self-indulgence. The last thing Argyll wanted was a detailed account of life with father, so he caught di Souza’s eye as the Spaniard wafted past. He barely had time for introductions when there came the sound of Samuel Thanet trying to get the attention of the assembled gathering. Silence gradually fell, and Thanet’s high-pitched, reedy voice eventually began to be heard. As everybody knew, he said, this party was in honour of Mr Moresby’s visit to the museum.

A respectful silence greeted this news, with the museum staff pondering their sins as though Thanet had suddenly upped and announced the second coming. It was a rather soupy speech, to Argyll’s way of thinking, a bit over-reverential in the almost hushed way in which he referred to the Great Man. Had the said Great Man been there, this would have been almost understandable. But Moresby hadn’t even arrived yet. Being nice to people behind their backs was going too far.

Apart from dropping heavy hints about what Moresby was going to say when he arrived, the speech did little except satisfy one small item of curiosity, which was the contents of the box which

Souza had brought over with him for Langton. In fact Argyll had been too busy pondering the implications of the proposed move back to London to wonder very much about this, but he listened with due care and attention as Thanet said he had a preliminary announcement to make about the museum's latest acquisition.

As he was sure everybody knew, he said, the Moresby's growth strategy – detestable term for a museum, thought Argyll, but let it pass – was to target specific areas of western art, and become world leaders in them. Impressionism, neo-classical, and baroque were high on the agenda, and much progress had been made to date.

Argyll shifted from foot to foot and leant over to di Souza.

'So what are they doing buying twelve priceless works of Roman sculpture?' he asked sarcastically. Di Souza gave him a nasty look.

'And what are they doing buying a Titian?' he countered.

Then the Spaniard held up his hand for silence. Thanet was at last getting to the interesting bit. Particularly, he was saying, they had decided to give new emphasis to baroque sculpture, and he was proud to announce that, in accordance with the Moresby's tradition of excellence – di Souza snorted – their latest acquisition in this field was a piece of unsurpassed importance. Although it was still in a packing case in Thanet's office, he was happy to announce that the museum would shortly be putting on display a masterpiece by that superlative artist of the Roman Baroque, Gianlorenzo Bernini. The museum now had in its possession the master's long-lost portrait bust of Pope Pius V.

Both Argyll and Jack were standing next to di Souza, glass in hand, when this announcement was made, and were thus in a position to hear the sharp intake of breath and gargling sound which erupted from the Spaniard's throat as he choked in mid-martini. They also witnessed the rapid change of expression – from surprise, to alarm and on to anger – which flitted across his face as he digested this announcement.

'Don't worry,' said Jack, patting him on the back. 'This place has that effect on everybody.'

'What's the matter?' Argyll asked. 'Jealous?'

Di Souza downed his drink in a gulp. 'Not exactly,' he replied. 'Just heart failure. Excuse me a moment.'

And with that he shot off in the direction of Samuel Thanet. Argyll's curiosity was piqued so, with as much subtlety as he could manage, he sidled over to see what was going on. Quite a lot, evidently, although most of the conversation seemed to be coming from di Souza. While clearly angry about something, he was at least in sufficient control to keep his voice down, otherwise the cheery atmosphere at the party might well have been severely damaged.

Argyll didn't catch it all, but the words 'worrying' and 'alarming' wafted in his general direction as he drew near. Di Souza seemed to be demanding to speak to Mr Moresby.

There was a lot – especially of Thanet's attempts to pacify – that Argyll didn't pick up. Also in earshot, Jack Moresby was shaking his head with sheer enjoyment. 'Christ, these people. How do you stand them?' he asked. 'Hell, I've had enough. I'm off home. It's not far. D'you want to come around for a drink sometime?'

He gave Argyll his address and wandered out into the pure air of a Santa Monica evening.

Meanwhile Thanet was rocking back on his heels due to the unexpected assault, but not giving ground. Initially he seemed to be doing his best to reassure the indignant Spaniard then, as the battering continued, resorted to the reliable technique of stonewalling. He had nothing to do with the bust, Thanet insisted; and di Souza knew that perfectly well.

Hector was unimpressed, but could do little. He retreated in good order, muttering furiously.

Argyll was, naturally, curious about this display, but knew di Souza's volubility well enough to realise that all would be revealed in good time. Hector was legendary for never being able to keep anything to himself.

'What are you looking at?' the Spaniard said rather sharply in Italian as he returned to the bar.

'Nothing at all. I was just wondering what you're so upset about.'

'A great deal.'

'Go on, then,' Argyll prompted.

Di Souza didn't reply.

'You've been smuggling again, haven't you?' he said in a confiding tone. It was relatively well known that di Souza supplemented his income by arranging for works of art to be spirited across the Italian border before the authorities could refuse export permission. They would certainly have refused an above-board application to export a Bernini: there would be thermonuclear detonation if they ever found out that one had been *smuggled* out of the country.

'Don't be ridiculous,' di Souza snapped back, with enough uncertainty in his voice to convince Argyll he was on the right track.

Argyll sucked in his breath and tutted with wholly hypocritical sympathy. 'Wouldn't want to be in your shoes if the folk at the *Belle Arte* get their fangs into you. Nasty, that'll be,' he said with an uncontrollable grin. Di Souza gave him a very unpleasant look. 'Serious offence, smuggling...'

'It's not smuggling I'm worried about.'

'Oh, go on, Hector, spill it.'

But there was no persuading him. Di Souza was panicked and adopting the tactic of saying as little as possible. You could see his point, Argyll thought. A public announcement, and reporters here as well. Had Thanet stood up and thanked di Souza for smuggling the bust out for him, it couldn't have been more awkward. All it needed now was a little whisper, a little looking, and Hector would be in big trouble back in Italy. Standing up in a court and saying that he hadn't known what was in that case would merely be greeted with hearty guffawing from the prosecutor. Argyll found it hard to believe himself.

'Hmm,' he said thoughtfully. 'You'll just have to hope that no one notices too much. All I can say is you're very lucky Flavia isn't here. She'd have your guts.'

He shouldn't have said that. Flavia di Stefano had been greatly on his mind all afternoon, all week, in fact, and he had only just succeeded in thinking of other things. If he put his hand on his head and confessed what it was that most attracted him to living in Rome, he would have had to say that, splendid though the buildings, the art, the streets, the food, the weather and the people were, what he really liked most was Flavia di Stefano, old friend, investigator in the Italian polizia art squad and a woman with a long-standing disapproval of those who smuggle the Italian heritage out of the country.

Flavia, alas, did not return his feelings. She was a wonderful companion and a perfect friend, but though Argyll had worked hard to persuade her to be something more his labours had produced remarkably little result. He was fed up with it. That was why he was able to reconcile himself to going back to England.

What more could he do? He'd mentioned Byrnes' proposal to her one evening as they came out of the cinema – with what result? Oh, don't go? Please stay? Even, I'll miss you, would have been a start. But nothing. All she'd said was that if his career would benefit then of course he should go. And changed the subject. Not only that, since then he'd barely seen her.

'What was that?' he said, coming out of his reverie and realising that di Souza was still talking.

'I said that when I have sorted everything out with Moresby not even your Flavia will have any

interest in me.'

'If you can. Besides, she's not my Flavia.'

'I've already told you I can. Simple to prove.'

'What is?' Argyll asked, puzzled. Evidently he'd missed more of di Souza's conversation than he'd thought.

'If you can't listen I'm not going to repeat it,' he said crossly. 'It's the second time you've spurned my anecdotes today. Besides, judging by the way the crowds are beginning to practise doing obeisance, I'd guess Moresby is arriving and I need an urgent talk with him. I'll fill you in later, if you can pay attention for long enough.'

Argyll followed in the slipstream of the guests heading for the main door where they could get a decent view of the proceedings. Di Souza was right. Moresby arrived with all the sense of occasion of a medieval potentate turning up to visit some minor province. Which he was, in a way. Compared to the vast range of his interests – Argyll vaguely remembered they stretched from oil to electronics, miscellaneous weaponry to financial services and just about everything in between – the museum was a fairly minor operation. Unless, of course, Thanet managed to prise open the old man's very tight fist and keep it open long enough to build his big museum.

It was an odd experience, halfway between being impressive and slightly ludicrous. The car was one of those stretched limousine affairs, about forty feet long with a small radio telescope on the back, all black tinted glass and shiny chromium. It swept up to the entrance and a host of nervous museum folk swept down to it, competing for the honour of opening the door. Then one of the richest men on the western seaboard emerged in the fading light of evening and everybody gazed at him reverentially.

From Argyll's standpoint, there wasn't much to be reverential about. From the purely visual, or aesthetic, point of view, Arthur M. Moresby II didn't amount to much. Tiny little fellow, peering myopically around him through thick round glasses, dressed up in a heavy suit much too thick for the weather and which, in truth, did little for his general appearance. He was almost completely bald and slightly pigeon-toed. A thin mouth, mottled complexion and ears that rose up to conclude with a very definite point at the top. He looked, indeed, a bit like a malevolent garden gnome. Putting himself in Anne Moresby's position, Argyll began to see the appeal of a narcissistic concoction like David Barclay.

Had it not been for the bank balance, it was difficult to imagine anyone gushing over him. On the other hand, he reflected as he scrutinised Moresby more closely, maybe that was unfair. The face indicated a man to reckon with. Entirely expressionless, it nonetheless radiated an air of chilly contempt for the clucking hordes gathered around him. Whatever his possibly innumerable faults, Arthur Moresby knew exactly why people were so keen to welcome him, and realised it had nothing to do with his loveable personality or exciting physique. Then he disappeared into the museum to get on with business, and the excitement was over.

3

Looking back on events later, Argyll viewed the following couple of hours with profound embarrassment. It was just his luck that, whenever something interesting happened, he would be elsewhere. It was simple enough; he was hungry and, no matter how many virtues oysters possess, no one can call them filling. Not like a burger and french fries, anyway, so after a few moments of indecision, resolved when he decided that hanging around in the hope of shaking Arthur Moresby by the hand was a demeaning way of spending an evening, he sloped off in search of a halfway decent restaurant and sat feeling miserable for an hour or so.

Indeed, he regretted not latching on to Jack Moresby to spend the night getting drunk together. He also regretted agreeing to have breakfast with di Souza. He'd had enough of the man already, what with spending much of the afternoon booking him into the same hotel he himself was staying at, carrying his luggage around, and listening to him at parties. Quite apart from the fact that he knew who was going to end up paying for breakfast.

And he also regretted his choice of restaurant. The service was interminably slow. The waitress (who introduced herself as Nancy and was most keen that he enjoy his food) did her best, but it was one of those places where the cook evidently begins by grinding his own wholemeal. Alas, he shouldn't have bothered. The end result wasn't worth the effort.

It was nearly eleven o'clock by the time Argyll set out for his hotel, after two hours spent all on his own with ample opportunity to feel sorry for himself. Apart from that, completely uneventful, except for narrowly avoiding being run over by an ancient truck painted with purple stripes. It was his own fault; he crossed the wide boulevard which led past the Moresby and on to his hotel in the cavalier fashion he had adopted for dealing with Roman traffic, and discovered that drivers in California, while generally slower, are not nearly as accurate as their Italian counterparts. A Roman shaves past your legs and makes your trousers billow in the wind but disappears over the horizon with a triumphant hooting of the horn, leaving no real damage behind. The driver of this particular vehicle either had clear homicidal tendencies or little skill; he flashed past, saw Argyll, blew his horn and swerved at only the last moment, very nearly consigning Argyll to the hereafter in the process.

As he reached the opposite sidewalk and his heart – boosted by alarm and the remarkable turn of speed he put on to reach safety – calmed down once more, he reflected that it was quite in keeping with life as it was currently progressing.

Heaving self-indulgent sighs at regular intervals, his thoughts meandered in a haphazard fashion as he ambled mournfully towards the hotel. Such was his mood that he was nearly past the museum itself before it penetrated his consciousness that all was not quite as it was when he'd left to search for nourishment. The floodlights still illuminated the building with ostentatious discretion, cars were still parked all over the place. But the number of people engaged in wearing the lawn down to waste land had grown enormously, and Argyll was fairly certain that the place had not been surrounded by fifteen police cars, four ambulances and a large number of helicopters when he left.

Strange, he thought. Prompted mainly by the pessimistic view that, knowing his luck, something untoward must have happened to his Titian, he changed direction and headed up the driveway.

‘Sorry. No entry. Not ’til morning.’ This from a policeman of impressive dimensions blocking the way in a fashion that brooked no argument. Even without the heavy weaponry strewn about his person, Argyll would not for a moment have contemplated disagreeing with his pronouncement. On the other hand, the scene had tickled his curiosity somewhat; so he announced firmly that the museum director had asked him to come round immediately. Samuel Thanet. The director. You know?

The policeman didn’t, but wavered a little. ‘Little fat guy? Wrings his hands?’

Argyll nodded. Thanet to a tee.

‘He’s just gone with Detective Morelli into the administrative block,’ he said, uncertainly.

‘And that’s just where he told me to meet him,’ Argyll said, lying through his teeth in a fashion which made him feel rather proud. He generally wasn’t a very good liar. Even fibs gave him a hard time. He beamed at the policeman and asked most politely to be let through. So convincing was he that, seconds later, he was climbing the stairs in the direction of a faint hubbub of noise.

It came from Samuel Thanet’s office, a carefully designed piece of upmarket administrative chi-whatever the museum architect’s limitations on exterior appearance, he had worked overtime on getting the office space right. A slightly anonymous room to Argyll’s mind, he preferring a more cosy and cluttered look, but expensively tasteful, nonetheless. White-washed walls; off-white sofa; beige-white woollen carpet; tubular modern armchairs covered in white leather; black wooden desk. The whorls and lines of two harshly illuminated modern paintings from the museum provided the only colour in the whole room.

Apart from the blood, of course, of which there was an appallingly large amount. But that was obviously a very recent addition rather than part of the decorator’s overall design concept.

And on the carpet lay the prostrate and immobile form of Samuel Thanet. Argyll stared horror-struck as he came through the door.

‘Murdered?’ he said aghast, eyes unable to tear themselves away from the sight.

A scruffy, tired-looking man, dressed in a casual fashion that would have been entirely unacceptable in the Italian polizia, and even in the carabinieri, looked up at him, wondering for a moment who this interloper was. He snorted contemptuously.

‘Course he’s not been murdered,’ he said shortly. ‘He’s fainted, that’s all. Came in, took one look at that and keeled over. He’ll be all right in a few minutes.’

‘That’ being a man-sized mound behind the desk covered, appropriately enough, by a white cloth, part of which was stained crimson. Argyll peered at it and felt a little queasy.

‘Who the hell are you?’ the man, apparently Detective Morelli, went on with perhaps forgivable directness.

Argyll explained.

‘You work for the museum?’

Argyll explained again.

‘You don’t work for the museum?’ he said, proceeding inexorably towards the truth. Argyll agreed this statement summed the matter up admirably.

‘Get out, then.’

‘But what is going on?’ Argyll insisted, natural curiosity overcoming him completely.

The detective made no answer at all except to bend down and casually flick back the white sheet from the mound on the floor. Argyll stared at the figure underneath, wrinkling his nose in disgust. No mistaking those ears: seen once, never forgotten.

The sudden and unexpected demise of Arthur M. Moresby, President of Moresby Industries (among other things) had clearly been caused, as the unemotional language of officialdom would put

it, by a shot in the head from a pistol at close range. It was not an appealing sight, and Argyll was heartily glad when the detective replaced the cloth and made the object once more a fairly unobtrusive shape under a sheet.

Morelli was in a bad mood. He had just been turned down for a promotion and felt a summer cold coming on. He'd been on duty for eighteen hours and badly wanted a shave, a shower, a decent meal and some peace. On top of that he had chronic gum inflammation and dreaded the prospect of a visit to the dentist. It wasn't the pain; that he could cope with. It was the bill that would follow that alarmed him. As his dentist kept on telling him, fixing gums was an expensive business. The man collected antique cars, so it must be profitable as well. Detective Morelli wasn't sure whether his gums were really going, or whether the dentist merely wanted a new carburettor for his 1928 Bugatti.

'Do you need any help?' Argyll asked, thinking it was a supportive thing to say. No harm in offering, after all.

The detective looked scornful. 'From you? Don't trouble yourself.'

'No trouble at all, honestly,' he said brightly.

Morelli was halfway through indicating that the Los Angeles homicide division, having managed without Jonathan Argyll for more than half a century, could probably stagger on without him for a bit longer when a pained groan came from the other recumbent form on the floor. Thanet, when he collapsed, had done so inconsiderately, straight in front of the door, causing a major bottleneck to traffic. The groan was caused by a large police boot inadvertently kicking him in the ribs.

'Oh, the Sleeping Beauty,' Morelli said, then turned to Argyll. 'You really want to be useful? Bring him round and get him out of the way. Get yourself out of the way while you're at it.'

So Argyll did, bending over the director and slowly helping him to his feet. Propping him up uncertainly, he called to Morelli that they'd be down the corridor, if needed. Then he steered Thanet that direction, settled him on a sofa and fussed around vainly trying to open windows and, more successfully, to provide glasses of water.

Thanet was no great shakes at conversation for some time. He stared at Argyll owlishly for several minutes before the power of speech returned.

'What happened?' he asked, with a striking lack of originality.

Argyll shrugged. 'I was rather hoping you'd tell me that. You were on the scene. I'm just a nosy passerby.'

'No, no. Not at all,' he said. 'First I knew was when Barclay came running back to the museum, telling people to phone the police. He said there'd been some sort of accident.'

'He must be a bit thick if he thought that was an accident,' Argyll commented.

'I think he was concerned not to let on too much to the newspaper men around. They always turn up. Can't keep anything secret from them, you know.'

'He found the body?'

'Mr Moresby said he was going to use my office to talk to di Souza...'

'Why?'

'Why what?'

'He could talk to him anywhere, couldn't he?'

Thanet frowned disapprovingly at the Englishman's concentration on irrelevancies. 'Di Souza wanted to talk about that bust and it's in my office. Anyway, later on...'

Argyll opened his mouth to ask how much later on. This concentration on detail was a habit he'd picked up from Flavia over the years. But he decided it might throw Thanet off his stride, so shut it again.

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