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Opening Extract from...

A Treacherous Likeness

Written by Lynn Shepherd

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A Treacherous Likeness

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CHAPTER ONE

The West Wind

We began before thick in autumn fog; we open now in the fury of a west and winter wind. Above us high loose clouds drive across a steep grey sky, and beneath our feet the dead leaves are driven before the unseen air like ghosts from an enchanter. Yellow and black and pale and hectic red, they swirl in dry squalls into narrow corners and lift in sudden gusts from the muddy gutters. It's no weather for walking and as yet only the muffin-seller is braving the bluster, bent half double against the freezing wind and struggling to keep both his hat on and his basket covered. No weather for walking, and no weather for idle lingering either, so we will take shelter for a moment in a graceful Georgian doorway and survey this graceful Georgian street. To the south, the level leaden drab of the river; to the north the heave of early-morning traffic on the Strand. But here all is quiet, and the only other passer-by a large black cat making its way purposefully across the cobbles and down the area steps of the house opposite, a rat dangling from its mouth like a rather rakish moustache. Few lights burn yet in the upper storeys, even if the servants in the cellars have been up and busy these two hours and more. Though there is, it appears, one exception. In that same house opposite, there is one uncurtained casement high above the street, and if we move just a little we can see a figure standing at the window.

It is a young man. His face pale, and his eyes deep-set and drawn. Or, at least, that is how it seems from here. Perhaps it is merely the reflection in the bluish glass, or perhaps he has been wakeful all night, and stands there now, prey to the same dark concerns. One thing is certain: we may be interested in him, but Charles Maddox does not even register our presence as he gazes down at the almost empty street, listening to the rattle of the window-panes, which is the only sound to trouble the tall and silent house. He sighs, understanding the exact pitch and weft of that silence, and knowing that it signifies there has been no change. Two floors below, in a larger and more elegant room than his, by a fine marble mantelpiece and a fire kept always carefully tended, his great-uncle lies unmoving in the same cold repose that has afflicted him now for more than three weeks. He breathes still – lives still – but it is a chill and twilight life, from which there may be no returning.

Charles turns back to the room. He has lived here more than a month now, and his attic space is finally taking the look of permanent occupation. Gone are the tea crates that brought his possessions halfway across town and up three flights of stairs, and in their place there's a line of new shelves all along one wall. His books are now arranged in rows, his collection in clusters, the latter accompanied by more or less neatly written labels: *Ethnographical*, *Zoological*, *Historical*, *Mineralogical*. The books, in the main, are scuffed with overuse; the objects, by contrast, have been positioned with care. The coins are laid in chronological order on a piece of new red velvet, and the shells and pieces of coral have been freed at last from the glass jar they've been stored in since Charles was still at school. And if you look a little closer, you'll see that this assortment of apparently unrelated items has not only been placed to best advantage, but as far as possible from the floor, though it's hard to tell whether this is to protect the objects from the cat, or the cat from his own curiosity. Thunder, incidentally, is far too busy at this precise moment, feasting on his prize rat, to be interested in Charles's curios, none of which is remotely palatable (though one or two of the brightly coloured stuffed birds on the top shelf do seem to be a little bald and abraded here and there,

which may suggest that Thunder has his owner's dedication to proper scientific methods, and has proved their inedibility with the odd practical experiment of his own).

Charles wanders now to the washstand and stands a moment, looking himself in the eye. The face that stares back at him in the mirror is rumpled from sleep, and the dark bronze curls unruly, but the cuts on his brow have left no scar. Much that he cares. The bowl on the stand is edged with ice, but when he goes to the door he finds no hot water waiting. He's just drawing breath to bellow down at Billy when instead he sees his great-uncle's former henchman making his slow way round the bend in the stairs, the steaming jug clenched in his gnarled hands. There was a time, years since, when there was no man more feared in the shadowier strata of London society than Abel Stornaway, though looking at him now you'd never think it: his legs are bowed, his back bent, and wisps of hair hang limply from his speckled, wrinkled skull. Age has withered him, just as it has the man he served, but Abel has waned only in body, while it is the mind of the master thief-taker that the decades have decayed.

Abel perches the jug on the washstand and eyes Charles as he unwraps the dressing on his right hand. It may be that you have met Charles before, in which case you will know how and why he came by this injury. You will know, too, that patience is hardly the first characteristic that comes to mind in relation to this young man, and will be surprised – perhaps – that he is still wearing the bandage when the hand must, by now, have almost healed. Though as the final strip of cloth falls away you can perhaps see why: with the bandage in place, the damage is masked; without it, there is no evading the fact that one finger is missing. Charles is not usually loath to confront reality, however unpleasant; indeed, his rather bull-headed determination to do just that, and make others do so too, has got him into trouble more than once. But there is clearly something about this particular reality that he cannot bear, or cannot bear quite yet, and it does not escape Abel's beady eye that a clean bandage was ready laid out and is even now being quickly fastened.

'What was it you wanted, Abel?' says Charles, a question that would sound to anyone else like the opening of a conversation but is really, as both men know, a changing of the subject. 'You usually send the boy up with the water, so there must be something.'

'You remember the calling card that was left, Mr Charles? Have you done owt about it?'

Charles shakes his head and goes over to the wardrobe, which is an efficient if rather cowardly way of avoiding Abel's eye. 'Not yet, Abel.'

'Men of his stamp dinnae want to be kept waiting. It's not mannerly, Mr Charles, and it's not sensible, not for a man in our line of work.'

Charles smiles, despite himself, at that 'our', and wonders for a moment how long it is since Abel worked a case – how long, indeed, since Maddox worked a case. He's seen the files in the office downstairs, and knows now that his great-uncle has been battling for his reason for far longer than Charles assumed that night only a few short weeks ago, when Abel had come looking for him and the two of them returned to this house to find Maddox flailing like a madman, and stinking in his own soil. And yet against all hope and medical opinion the master thief-taker has once or twice returned, and when he has, the edge and incision of his insights have made the madman seem like an obscene dream. It was the lucid, not the lunatic, Maddox who helped Charles solve his last case – that same Maddox who taught him everything he knows about the art and science of investigation, that same Maddox who both is, and is not, lying now in the room beneath them, marooned in an eerie, fretful immobility.

'You cannae bring him back by watching,' says Abel, softly. 'The doctor—'

'What does he know?' snaps Charles, his blue eyes flashing. 'He cannot even tell us what ails him, much less do anything useful to cure it.'

'Mebbe there is no cure, Mr Charles. Mebbe we will have tae let him go.'

Charles turns away, but Abel sees the lift of his chin and knows

he is fighting back the tears. 'I know how much he means to 'ee, but you cannae spend every waking hour by his side. He wouldnae want it.'

'I should have been here. I should have done something.'

Abel sighs. He's suspected for some time that this might be at the bottom of it. 'It wouldnae hae made any difference, Mr Charles. The fit came upon him so quick – it would hae been the same whoever was by. And the reason you were nae here was because you were doing your job. That's what he'd hae wanted. Just as he'd want you to go call on that gentleman who left his card. For courtesy's sake, if naught else.'

'What's the use?' says Charles, with a shrug. 'It's probably just some paltry indoor case. Servants pinching the pastry-forks. And it's not as if we need the money.'

'Work is its own reward, as my old father used to say. And you need to get yerself away from this house for a few hours. Exercise yer mind. Even if it is does turn out to be naught more than pilfering.'

Charles takes a deep breath, then nods. 'All right. I'll go this morning.' He turns heavily and contemplates his small collection of shirts. 'I suppose I had better make myself look presentable. If I'm going calling on a baronet.'

On his way down the stairs half an hour later Charles pauses for a moment at the drawing-room door. The curtains have been opened and Abel is attempting to feed Maddox from a bowl of porridge. And we can see that the old man's face is drawn down on the left side, while the left hand and arm seem bent and unnaturally stiff. It will be obvious to you, now, what has happened, and there are doctors in London Charles could summon with knowledge enough to diagnose an apoplexy. But they will not be able to help him. Most of the porridge has already ended up on the napkin tied bib-wise under the old man's chin, and he is making small whimpers of distress at Abel's every attempt with the spoon. A month ago Maddox would have dashed it to the ground in fury and frustration, but now he has neither the will nor

the capacity even to push the food away. With the mind he once had, and the dread and deference he once commanded, there could hardly be a more bitter degradation. It's pitiful to watch – too pitiful for Charles – and he moves to close the door, but at that moment a thought strikes him and he turns back into the room.

'You did say, didn't you, Abel, that it was seeing that man's calling card that brought on my uncle's attack?'

Abel pauses in his spooning and looks up. 'Well, I cannae say exactly that's what it was.'

'But that was what the two of you were talking about, just before it happened?'

'Aye, so it was.'

'And the last word he said before he collapsed was a name – a woman's name.'

'Aye, Mr Charles. The last thing he said to me was ''Mary''. I thought he were talking about that woman he loved all those long years ago, before you were born. But you said you thought it could be someone else entirely.'

Charles takes the card out of his pocket and looks at it again. 'Yes,' he says quietly. 'I think it is.'

Charles's destination is Belgravia, which is a good stretch on a day like this, and he starts with every intention of walking, but after ten minutes of battling against the wind, his eyes squinting and streaming in the flying dust, he admits defeat and joins the queue for the omnibus. The early rush has subsided so he manages to get a seat, and sits with his shoulders hunched as the 'bus inches its way through the din of wagons, coaches, carts and hansoms pressed nose to tail along the Strand, and turns slowly into St Martin's Lane. This route is usually thronged with pedlars, beggars, ballad-singers and tinkers, but in weather like this only the boldest are braving the wind, both buyers and sellers. And as Charles well knows from his time in the police, most of the city's street-sellers and costermongers live so hand to mouth that the edge of starvation is as close as three days' rain.

*

Half an hour later Charles steps down from the 'bus a mile and a world away, and starts through Belgravia's pristine stucco squares – a district so deep-rooted in the London landscape now that it's hard to believe these buildings date back only to the late 1820s: some of the houses Charles passes are even now not fully completed. But despite that fact, and the rather unsightly corners of builders' rubble and cast-off brick, these serene white houses are home already to the richest population in the world. And then as now, that kind of cash secures intangible assets as much as tangible ones, and the most valuable of them all in this rowdy, dirty town is privacy. Hence the eight-bar gates across the entrance to Chester Square, and the polite if somewhat pugnacious gate-keeper who insists on seeing the calling card left at Buckingham Street before allowing Charles to pass. A performance he has to go through a second time for the benefit of the butler who answers the door at number twenty-four.

'Are you expected?' the man says, glancing rather disdainfully at the (by now) rather dog-eared card, and clearly wondering if Charles has fished it out of a bin.

'Not, perhaps, this morning,' he replies, sardonic, 'but seeing as the card was accompanied by a request to call, I imagine my arrival will hardly come as a complete surprise.'

The butler frowns slightly. 'I will see if my master or my lady is at home.'

The door closes, and Charles stamps up and down for five minutes on the steps trying to keep warm, not much bothered that the noise must be perfectly audible from inside the house.

The door opens again, and the butler reappears.

'If you would come with me.'

Charles dutifully follows him along the hall and up the stairs. His eyes are, to all appearances, courteously averted, but his great-uncle has taught him well and he is extremely proficient at discerning a great deal from the seemingly trivial. Houses, animals and clothes often tell him more about the people who own them than those owners ever do (and we might reflect in passing how much we've already learned of Charles from his eccentric

collection of specimens, his complete lack of interest in his personal appearance, and his care for his cat). As for this house, it is conventionally laid-out and conventionally furnished, in what the occupants no doubt consider to be good taste, but Charles, for one, considers it to be just a little too over-embellished, and a mite too ponderous. Exactly the same conclusions, as a matter of fact, as he drew from that small piece of cardboard two inches by three, which is all he's had to go on up till now. He can see likewise that the brightly coloured fabrics and upholstery in this house are actually of rather inferior quality, and the furniture probably second-hand. There seems, indeed, to be an intriguing tension between a desire for flamboyance and a reluctance to pay for it, and he wonders if perhaps those two sentiments are a reflection of the master and mistress of this house, and if so, which is which.

The butler opens the drawing-room door to let him in, then closes it quietly behind him. It is a blue room, this one, though the blues are not all quite the same tone, as if individual pieces have been bought from different sales. There are not the shelves of books Charles would have expected to find in a house owned by this family, and the cabinets at either side of the fireplace are congested instead with ornaments and china figurines, and here and there a porcelain-faced doll. The only books visible in the room are in two glass-fronted cases placed directly beneath a portrait, accorded pride of place between the long windows giving onto the square. Charles takes a pace or two towards it and finds himself face to face not with the man he has come to see, but with his father. Or, at least, with his likeness. Framed in over-ornate gold, the painting hangs above a pier-table, which, along with the books, holds an arrangement of wax lilies under a glass dome, and a candle in a silver chamberstick. The candle is lit, even in broad day, and someone has carefully pasted dark blue paper spangled with stars to the back of the bookcases. The overall effect is unsettlingly shrine-like, and far too queasily mawkish for Charles, but he's drawn to the portrait none the less. He's seen it before somewhere – no doubt reproduced as a frontispiece – but he looks at it now with a more professional interest. From a purely technical

perspective the painting has little to recommend it, but it is the subject, not the style, that will make this one of the century's most recognized portraits. The dark jacket and the white shirt open at the neck; the unruly curls and the intense gaze; the pen held poised in the long, slender fingers. When this man died he was an exile and a pariah, 'an outcast from human society', denounced for his beliefs and reviled for his conduct, his works condemned and largely unread. And yet by the end of the century this image will have become an icon of all it means to be 'Romantic' – all it means to be a poet, and a genius, and an unacknowledged legislator of the world. An appropriate quotation that, because the man this portrait shows – as the inscription confirms – is none other than

Percy Bysshe Shelley
4th August 1792 – 8th July 1822
He has outsoared the shadow of our night:
Envy and calumny, and hate and pain,
And that unrest which men miscall delight,
Can touch him not and torture not again.

Charles moves closer, struck by the dates. The poet was not quite thirty, then, when he died, and this likeness must have been produced some time before that, but there is all the same an oddly childlike quality to the faint, almost girlish flush, and the pink bud of a mouth. And if he was not quite thirty in 1822, that means (as Charles quickly calculates), his son must be about that age now.

'They all do that.'

Charles swings round, too absorbed in the picture to have heard the encroaching steps. 'I'm sorry?'

The man before him is stout, rather paunchy, and a good three inches shorter than Charles. He has watery hangdog eyes, a beaky nose, and a sandy nondescript beard that is in need of a good trim. 'Nondescript' rather sums him up, in fact, since there is nothing remotely unusual or distinctive about him. So much so, indeed, that Charles initially assumes he must be some or other household

retainer – a secretary or steward – but as the man starts talking it becomes obvious how wrong that assumption was.

'The painting. Everyone who comes here looks at it like that. Copy, of course. Real one's in the mater's room. But I'm told this ain't bad. Wouldn't know myself. Never did have an eye for art.'

He talks in the clipped, tight way so redolent of a public-school education, and for all that he looks nearer fifty than thirty there is still something of the overgrown schoolboy about him. Part of it, no doubt, is down to his rather gawky awkwardness – something that most men in his position outgrow long before their majority, and which suggests to Charles that he was not always destined to hold the title his father never lived to inherit, and the money that title brought with it has come to him late, after years of stringency. Which may, now Charles thinks about it, go a long way to explaining the character of this house. Meanwhile, the man in question has wandered over to a table in the centre of the room, and begun to fiddle absent-mindedly with a scale model of a sailing-boat. Charles stares at it, and at him, for a brief, dumb-founded moment, for Shelley drowned aboard just such a vessel as that, and in all probability it was the unstable and extravagant design of that boat, and his failure to recognize it, and make allowances in the rigging of it, that drove him and the two men with him to their deaths. But that being the case, how can his widow and son bear such a reminder, every day, every time they enter this room? But here, yet again, his host wrong-foots him.

'A peach, isn't she?' he says, gesturing Charles to a chair. 'The *Eirene*. Had her namesake built for me at Mallaby's in Putney in 'forty-seven. Took her to Norway that year too. Lovely mover. Takes the wind like a swallow. Mater can't bear the sight of it. Can't blame her, I suppose. Always was a worrier. Specially about sailing.'

'Well,' stammers Charles, 'I suppose that's only to be expected.'

'Odd, though, ain't it? That a fellow should enjoy nothing more than pottering about in boats when his pater drowned in one. Never have been able to explain it.' He sets the boat back on its stand and comes over to the sopha opposite the one where Charles

has taken a seat. He sits down rather heavily and stares at Charles, rubbing his beard. He seems rather ill at ease, and keeps glancing at the door as if expecting someone else.

'Look here,' he says eventually, 'Maddox, is it? This is rather a rum do, and that's a fact.'

Charles waits, not knowing what encouragement is required. 'I am quite accustomed,' he ventures, after a moment or two, 'to dealing with matters of a sensitive nature. I know that a man in your position—'

Sir Percy waves his hand. 'Quite so, quite so. Not that. Not that at all. Thing is—'

And now the door does indeed open, and a woman enters the room with all the briskness of a career housekeeper. She is certainly dressed like one, in a sensible plain dress long past its first wearing and a pair of practical shoes, but Charles has wised up now and deduces – correctly – that this is the lady of the house, even if it is clear to him in an instant that she, too, was not born to the rank she now enjoys. And seeing that, he is on his feet at once, knowing from experience that a woman in such a situation will insist on her due recognition all the more ardently.

'My apologies, Percy,' she says, taking a seat beside her husband. 'Dear Madre is rather unwell this morning and couldn't bear to have me leave her.'

Sir Percy, meanwhile, looks visibly relieved at being released from a task that was clearly giving him a good deal of difficulty and, having made the introductions, sinks back into the sopha to take what Charles guesses to be his accustomed secondary position.

'Sir Percy has told you of our predicament?' she begins, looking Charles up and down with no apparent embarrassment. She is sitting as far forward on the sopha as her husband is behind. 'Perched' is the word that comes irresistibly to mind, and she does indeed look rather bird-like sitting there. Charles searches for a species and suppresses a superior smile as he settles on a squab. A rather unkind analogy, but undeniably apt for a woman so plump, grey, and pigeon-breasted and who is, to all appearances, bright-eyed without being particularly bright-minded. The look

fits, certainly, but whether it will lead our young man dangerously to underestimate her intelligence, we shall have to wait and see.

'I was just getting to all that, my love,' murmurs her husband, 'when you came in.'

'Ah, well,' she says quickly, 'in that case, it may save time if I give you these notes I have prepared. They are, needless to say, completely confidential, and not to be divulged or copied without our express permission.'

Charles is taken aback, for the third time already in that house: this is quite definitely the first occasion that a client has ever prepared him a briefing in advance. He takes the papers she is holding out, but she gives him no more than a minute to start reading before speaking again.

'As you see, our dear Madre has been the subject of several previous incidents of the like shameful nature. Rogues and charlatans who have attempted to abuse her gentle nature, and exploit her absolute devotion to the Dear Departed for their own mercenary ends.'

Charles looks up from the paper, struck as much by her portentous tone as by what she says. Evidently both the poet and his wife are only to be spoken of in Capital Letters, and he knows now whose idea that shrine on the table was, and who – in this house – is the literal and metaphorical keeper of the flame. He clears his throat, 'These notes will be most useful as an *aide-memoire*, Lady Shelley, but perhaps you could start by giving me an account – in your own words – of the ''predicament'' you mentioned. If you would be so good?'

Lady Shelley glances at her husband, then turns to Charles. 'Well,' she commences, 'you may know that in the early years of her marriage Madre spent a good deal of time travelling on the Continent, and also lived in a number of different houses in England. It was unfortunate therefore, but perhaps inevitable, that papers would sometimes go astray, or be left behind, and some of these have since fallen into unscrupulous hands.'

Charles nods, perceiving that some reaction is necessary, and she takes a breath and plunges on.

'In recent years, as the reputation of the Dear Departed has grown and the world is finally coming to appreciate the exalted quality of his Genius, certain individuals have come forward claiming to be in possession of those missing papers.'

This is all starting to sound suspiciously like a prepared speech and Charles wonders how many others of his calling have sat here and heard it.

'Some of these papers,' she continues, 'have proved to be genuine, and most of these Madre has purchased. Others have been the most infamous impostures.'

Charles glances down at the notes. 'I take it you are referring to the incident mentioned here – concerning George Byron?'

Lady Shelley snorts with disdain. 'He *called* himself that and claimed the descent, even if illegitimately, but believe me, he is no more Lord Byron's son than I am—' she looks around, seemingly in need of an even more outrageous and unbelievable comparison '—or *you* are.'

Charles is irrationally piqued by this observation, and there is perhaps just the slightest sharpness in his reply: 'Legitimate or not, it appears from these notes that the man did indeed possess some of Mrs Shelley's papers.'

Lady Shelley lifts her nose, as if troubled by a bad smell. 'Some were genuine, yes. We never did discover how that scoundrel laid hands upon them. But most of those he tried to sell poor dear Madre were outright forgeries.'

'I see,' says Charles. 'And the second case? The memoir?'

There is a sudden rattle as the wind hurls at the window and the candle burning beneath the portrait dips and wavers, throwing ghastly shadows up over the poet's face. Lady Shelley is on her feet in an instant, rushing to the table and holding her hand close about the flame until it straightens and gathers strength.

'The servants are under strict instructions,' she says, as she returns to the sopha. 'The candle is never to be allowed to die.'

'You were saying, Lady Shelley? About the memoir?'

Her face darkens, and she purses her thin lips. 'That was of a rather different order. A cousin of the Poet's, one Thomas Medwin,

sought to make money from their slight connection when mere boys by publishing what he impudently termed a ''Life''. It was nothing but a base attempt at villainous extortion.'

Charles frowns. 'I'm not sure I follow – how could he use such a memoir to extract money?'

'By offering *not* to publish it, of course!' retorts Lady Shelley, somewhat shrilly. 'He told Madre she could prevent it appearing if she paid him two hundred and fifty pounds. Which she did not have, and would *not* have paid, even if she had.'

'So he was aware from the start that Mrs Shelley would not want such a memoir to appear?'

'That or any other. Madre has always maintained that if the Poet's life is to be written she will do it herself. But now is not yet the time. The world is not yet ready.'

Charles is willing to wager this is another of Lady Shelley's prepared speeches, and her cheeks have now gone rather red. And he can understand why. There are aspects of Shelley's life that are far less palatable in 1850 than they would have been in the rather more broad-minded first quarter of the nineteenth century. Indeed, one would be hard put to come up with two notions more utterly repugnant to the strait-laced mid-Victorian bourgeoisie than Atheism and Free Love.

'So she tried to persuade this Medwin to forbear?'

'Quite so – in fact I believe ''forbearance and reserve'' were exactly her words. But the blackguard took no notice. Poor Madre was nearly frantic with worry, wondering what he might say.'

'Complete bounder,' mutters Sir Percy. 'Country's going to the dogs.'

Charles looks from one to the other. 'And the memoir itself, did it appear?'

Lady Shelley has regained her composure. 'Some three years ago. It was not, as it turned out, quite as detrimental to the fame of the Poet as Madre had feared, but it was still quite deplorably inaccurate on many points of moment, and seemingly written with the sole purpose of endowing the author with a significance in the Poet's life he most certainly did *not* possess.'

And how could she know that, wonders Charles, since she cannot possibly have ever met him? But he elects to let it pass. 'I believe you said there were other similar instances?'

Sir Percy shifts in his seat. 'Well, there was that Gatteschi fellow, but that was back in 'forty-five—'

His wife gives him a sharp glance, and a silent message passes between them. This time Charles decides he will push, just a little, and see what results.

'Gatteschi?'

Lady Shelley takes out her handkerchief and waves it, as if to swat away such unpleasantness. 'It was rather distressing at the time, but nothing came of it in the end, God be thanked. Madre met him in Paris. Very handsome, very dashing, but *quite* without principles. Dear Madre has always been so trusting, and this dreadful man preyed upon it. He inveigled himself into her confidence and ended up in receipt of some letters relating to her past life that would apparently have had most unfortunate consequences if they had been made public.'

'Letters from Shelley?'

'No,' she says, flushing again. 'They were letters Madre had written to Gatteschi herself.'

How very interesting, thinks Charles. Why would she have unburdened herself of such damaging details to an all-but stranger? And what could she possibly have divulged that the world does not already know – and condemn?

'But as I said,' Lady Shelley continues, 'a dependable friend was happily on hand, and the police proved surprisingly efficient – for the French. All the papers were seized and safely destroyed. But the whole affair caused Madre the most dreadful torment. Thankfully she has me to protect her now. And I will absolutely *not* allow anything of the kind to happen again.'

Charles wonders if she realizes what a dim light this casts on the man she married – who should surely be the one to protect his widowed mother, if such a role is required – but if either of them is aware of it they give no sign. Perhaps Sir Percy is so used to hearing the like observations that he scarcely notices any more.

Husband and wife are both silent for a time, then he gives a feeble cough and she wipes her eyes. The mere thought of the Poet and his widow appears to raise Lady Shelley to a pitch of breathless emotion that her own husband has never succeeded in exciting. The Victorians have no word for 'groupie', but Charles is in the presence of one all the same. He waits a moment longer, having learned from his great-uncle what a weapon silence can be, and how swiftly most people will rush to fill it. But these two seem to be the exception.

'Am I to understand that you asked me to come here because something of the kind has indeed happened again?'

Lady Shelley looks up, and now her plain round face is suffused with indignation. 'It is infamous – quite *infamous.* It has come to our attention that a connection of Madre's from many years ago has returned unexpectedly to London, and may even now be hawking the Poet's private papers around London, in an attempt to sell them to the highest bidder.'

Charles notes that word 'connection'. It's the second time Lady Shelley has used it and it's clearly her own personal shorthand for all those she deems unworthy of the role in Shelley's life that Fate has so thoughtlessly allowed them to play. 'And by ''connection'', do you mean a friend, an admirer, perhaps a relative—'

'Most definitely *not* a relative,' she says quickly.

'And the papers this person claims to have – are they genuine?'

Again that exchange of looks between the two of them.

'Could be,' says Sir Percy, after a moment. 'Hard to tell without seeing 'em.'

'But if they *are* genuine,' persists Charles, 'I do not see that any criminal offence has been committed, and nor do I see how the sale of them can be prevented. The memorabilia of prominent men will always find a ready buyer.'

'Oh, as to that,' says Lady Shelley, 'we are under no illusions. We are resigned to paying the price, however usurious. Securing Madre's peace of mind is our only concern.'

'In that case,' says Charles, making ready to stand, 'I would advise you to hire a lawyer, not a detective. I have no experience in such negotiations, and I do not see how I can assist you.'

'Oh, we have a lawyer,' says Lady Shelley, rather airily, 'but he cannot do what *you* could do.'

Charles looks at her, suddenly wary. 'And that is?'

Lady Shelley opens her mouth to reply, but Sir Percy must have caught something in Charles's tone, because he suddenly lumbers forward rather heavily in his seat. 'Look here, Maddox, I'm going to be honest with you. We're caught in a cleft stick as far as this rotten affair goes. Damned if we do, damned if we don't. And the poor mater isn't what she was. Headaches. Fainting. Partial paralysis on occasion. Dreadful business. Had doctor after doctor in to see her, but none of 'em can tell us what the trouble is. Last thing we want is this sordid to-do dragging on like last time, week after week, month after month. We'll take our medicine and pay the price, but what we need to know first is how much of this stuff there is. Don't want to buy a bunch of letters and then find there's more where that lot came from, and we're back to scratch and yet more to pay. You understand?'

Charles nods. He understands perfectly. Indeed, he's rather more sympathetic than they might assume, and not just because he's always considered blackmail one of the most loathsome of crimes. All unknowingly, Sir Percy has struck a painful chord: Charles, too, is facing the last decline of someone he loves, and has found no doctor who can slow the fall.

'So,' he says eventually, 'you want me to be your spy.'

He had not meant it to sound so brutal, and Lady Shelley bridles, but her husband lays his hand on her arm.

'You can put it that way if you choose, Maddox. Way *we* see it is you'd be protecting me frail old mater from someone who's plagued the life out of her for years.'

It may not be poetic, but it seems heartfelt. Charles looks at them both, and makes a decision. 'Very well. I will see what can be done. But I make no promises. I think you are already informed of my fees?'

Sir Percy nods.

'In that case I will report back to you in a few days.'

They get to their feet, and Sir Percy shakes his hand. His skin is

warm and slightly clammy to the touch, though the room is hardly overheated. Lady Shelley rings the bell, then goes to a small writing-desk in the corner of the room and takes out a slip of paper. 'This is the person,' she says, as she comes towards Charles.

A surname, and an address. A few moments later the butler appears, but as Charles gets to the door a thought occurs to him and he turns. 'One last thing, Sir Percy. Why did you choose me? There are many other detectives you might have consulted. Was it a recommendation?'

Sir Percy coughs. 'My wife was going through some of the mater's papers the other day and came upon a reference to your great-uncle. Seems he helped the grandpater with a minor legal matter some years ago. And when we heard that you'd taken over his business, we made the usual enquiries and so forth, and decided you would be as good as anyone.'

It's hardly a ringing endorsement, but that's not the reason Charles asked the question. 'When you say your grandfather, Sir Percy, was that on your mother's side, or your father's?'

Is there, perhaps, a moment's hesitation?

'Grandpapa Godwin,' answers Lady Shelley, stepping forward.

'I see,' replies Charles, noting again how she appropriates her husband's relations, and insinuates an intimacy with people she cannot conceivably have met. 'And yet it was the Shelley name I believe my uncle recognized.'

Sir Percy is standing now with his back to the window, a shadow cast before his face. 'Did he now, by Jove?' he says, with a slightly artificial jauntiness. 'And what did the old fellow have to say?'

Charles shakes his head. 'I have not been able to speak to him of it. He suffered a severe attack the day you called, and has not spoken since. I am assuming the two events were not connected. Unless, of course, you can tell me otherwise?'

There's an awkward silence. Then Lady Shelley comes towards Charles and accompanies him to the door. 'Well, if you do find any papers relating to Grandpapa, you must bring them to show us,' she says animatedly. 'We are – as you now know – avid collectors of all that concerns the Dear Departed.'

Charles gives no reply, but takes his leave once more and follows the butler downstairs and out into the cold and windy square.

The bruised clouds are purple with unfallen rain and the first icy drops are already in the air. Charles turns up his collar and quickens his pace. A small part of his brain is mulling how exactly he is going to do what he has just agreed to attempt, but most of it is contemplating that controversially ordinary man upstairs, and concluding with a private grin that those scientists who claim that characteristics can be passed from one generation to the next need look no further than Chester Square to find the exception that proves the rule. For if talent, or intellect, or genius can really be bequeathed, what a prodigy this man should have been, who numbers among his immediate ancestors four of the greatest literary minds of the last two hundred years.

Back in the drawing room, meanwhile, the Shelleys are watching him as he makes his way along the square and disappears out of sight towards Eccleston Street

'Well?' says Sir Percy, turning at last to his wife, all jauntiness gone. 'Don't strike me he knows anything, whatever you might have thought.'

'We cannot afford to be complacent,' Lady Shelley replies sharply, still looking down at the square. 'Not with so much at stake.'

A few yards away a beggar who has lost both hands has taken shelter under one of the elm trees and is sitting on the pavement cutting out figures with a pair of scissors held in his feet. A concertina of paper dolls is on the blanket in front of him, weighed down in the wind by ha'penny coins. Lady Shelley frowns and bangs on the window, gesturing peremptorily to the gate-keeper to come and move him off.

'Still think it could all be a terrific to-do about nothing,' mumbles Sir Percy. 'The mater never gave a hint about any of it when I was growing up.'

'How could she have done so without destroying the past for

ever in your eyes? Without creating a monster in your mind that even her years of selfless devotion could not counter? It is no surprise to *me* that she has cast a veil of oblivion over those events, and spoken of them only in the bitter privacy of her private journal.'

'And there's no mistake – you're sure it's Harriet she spoke of?'

'*You*,' says his wife, with emphasis, 'have not been through their papers. *You* have not read how that wretched girl really met her death. Can you imagine what would ensue if such a document were to become known – such a scandal bruited abroad? *We* may know that woman's secret, but that will not prevent the vulgar world from casting her as an innocent and forsaken wife. After everything I have done to efface all trace of her.'

'But if you burned what you found—'

Her impatience now is flaming in her face. 'But how do we know what *else* there might be? What records that old meddler Maddox might have kept? For one thing, I assure you, is abundantly clear, and that is that *he* had a hand in it. Everything that happened that whole dreadful winter – *he* was involved. Think what that might mean – what more he might know that even we do not yet suspect – what he might say, should he choose to do so.'

Sir Percy shakes his head. 'From what I gathered, he's in no condition to say much at all—'

'But there may still be *papers*, Percy – papers he wrote at the time that would be far more credible, and far more damaging, than the ramblings now of a mad old man.'

'And you don't think it's a risk, hiring this nephew of his? Seemed pretty sharp-witted to me.'

'In that case,' she replies tartly, 'he should be more than capable of resolving our other, more immediate, problem. He is not to know that there is a second, and far more significant task we are using him to accomplish.'

She turns to the window and watches as the gatekeeper pulls the beggar roughly to his feet and manhandles him away. The paper dolls are scattering across the pavement in the wind.

'All the same, Jane,' her husband continues behind her, 'might it not be best just to let matters lie? After all, if nothing's come to light in all these years—'

'How many times must I say this?' she snaps. 'We cannot rely on that state of affairs continuing. If the old man shows no sign of ever recovering there will come a moment when this young fellow will take it upon himself to go through his effects. And who knows then what he may unearth – what papers he may discover that the old man has hidden? Far better that we anticipate such an event, and act now to counter it.'

Sir Percy shakes his head again, his ruddy cheeks suddenly pale. 'I'm still not happy about this, Jane, and as for what you suggested – strikes me as a pretty low way of carrying on. Rather *infra dig*, if you must know—'

She silences him with a glance and turns back once more to the window, her round, plain face suddenly hardened, hawkish. 'If we may contrive to avoid such a course, so much the better. But I tell you this – I will *not* have all I have striven for overturned, or see the labour of so many years laid waste.' Her eyes narrow and her voice drops so low she seems to be speaking only for her own hearing. 'I will not permit the spectre of that woman to return to haunt us, or allow everything this family has achieved to be ruined in her name.'