The Final Truth

Sherlock Holmes - The Secret Letters

Alistair Croft

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Notes from Alistair Croft

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the fourth and final volume of *The Secret Letters*.

Every journey eventually reaches its final chapter, and this book brings to a close a story that began far from the familiar rooms of Baker Street.

When I first imagined this series, I was drawn to one of the most intriguing periods in Sherlock Holmes's life: the years after the Reichenbach Falls, when the world believed him dead and Watson mourned the loss of his friend. Those hidden years occupy only a small space in the original canon, yet they offer a vast landscape for the imagination. Where did Holmes go? What dangers occupied him? And what sort of man was he when he could no longer be Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street, but had to live in the shadows under assumed names?

The answers led me first to Paris.

What began as an investigation into forged works of art soon expanded into something far larger. Holmes found himself drawn into a web of collectors, criminals, scholars, and powerful interests whose ambitions reached far beyond the walls of any gallery. The trail eventually led him to Rome and to the mystery of *Saint Peter's Confession*—a lost and highly controversial document whose value could not be measured merely in money.

Before Holmes could uncover the full truth, however, the document fell into the hands of Sebastian Moran.

From that moment onward, the story became a pursuit.

Across cities, across borders, and finally across the Atlantic Ocean, Holmes followed both the document and the man who possessed it. Along the way he encountered allies, rivals, visionaries, opportunists, and more than a few individuals whose motives were never entirely clear. Each carried a piece of the mystery. Each helped shape the path that has led us here.

As this final volume opens, Holmes has reached New York. Moran still possesses the document, powerful figures are gathering around it, and the game is entering its final stage. Yet, as so often happens in Holmes's world, the true mystery may not lie within the object everyone seeks, but within the people who seek it.

This book concludes the story of *The Secret Letters*.

Yet it does not conclude Holmes's hidden years.

Several years still remain before the day when he will once again step through the door of Baker Street and reveal himself to a stunned Dr. Watson. Much of that time remains unwritten. There are still roads he has not traveled, mysteries he has not shared, and adventures that have yet to find their way onto the page.

Whether those stories will someday be told, I cannot yet say.

For now, however, I invite you to join Holmes for one final stage of this journey.

Thank you for traveling with him—and with me. Enjoy the story.

Warm regards,
Alistair Croft

Introduction

BY JOHN H. WATSON, M.D.

I set aside the logbook of the *SS Majestic* and remain seated for a moment, my gaze resting upon its dark cover.

There is something peculiar about the conclusion of a travel narrative. Even when one knows that the story is not truly finished, it still feels as though a chapter of one's own life has been brought to a close. During the past days I have followed Holmes from Naples, across the Mediterranean, and onward over the Atlantic. I have stood beside him upon the deck, listened to his reflections, and shared his growing concern as Moran appeared to draw steadily farther ahead. Now the voyage across the ocean is over—for him no less than for myself.

Upon my desk lies a small bundle of letters, carefully arranged and dated in the same firm handwriting that I know so well. They point toward a new destination: New York.

I lean back in my chair and allow my eyes to wander toward the window, where the late afternoon is slowly yielding to evening. London lies grey and quiet beyond the glass. A light rain has settled over the street, and the few passersby hurry along beneath their umbrellas. The contrast with the city that awaits in the letters before me could scarcely be greater.

I have myself visited New York on several occasions over the years, and although many details have long since faded from memory, my first impression remains as vivid as ever. There was something about that city which distinguished it from every other place I had known.

Paris had impressed me with its elegance. Rome with its history. But New York seemed neither old nor elegant. It seemed new—almost un-

finished—as though it were growing faster than men could build it. I still remember the harbour: the countless ships; the masts rising everywhere like a forest of wood and steel; the black funnels of the steamships; the ferries moving endlessly back and forth between the piers. And above it all there was that curious sense of motion, as though the entire city were traveling toward some destination of its own. Even London, which in so many respects stood at the center of the world, had never given me quite the same impression. In New York everything appeared larger. The fortunes were greater. The buildings taller. The dreams more ambitious. Even the mistakes seemed larger.

Perhaps that was why I was not surprised to find Holmes's next letters dated from there. When I think back upon the events in Paris and Rome, it now seems almost inevitable that the trail should end in America. Paris had been the city of art. Rome had been the city of faith. Yet the document for which so many people had risked their freedom, their reputations, and in some cases even their lives had gradually become more than a religious secret. It had become a commodity—something that could be bought and sold, something to which a price could be attached. And where could such a transaction occur more naturally than in the city which already seemed to have made commerce its principal religion?

I lower my eyes once more to the letters. Somewhere in the pages that follow, Holmes stands upon a New York pier. Moran remains somewhere ahead of him. Camille Ardent is still playing her dangerous game. And the pursuit that began so far from America is far from over.

I have learned, over the years, that when Holmes appears to be approaching the end of a mystery, it is often precisely then that the true pattern first begins to reveal itself. With that thought, I take up the topmost letter, carefully break the seal, and unfold the pages before me.

Then I begin to read.

The First Letter

January 19, 1892
New York City

A cry of "Land in sight!" rang out across the ship. At first, it was no more than a single excited voice somewhere out on deck, but almost immediately the cry was repeated by others, and soon it spread through the entirety of third class like an electric current. People abandoned their bunks, threw coats over their shoulders, and hurried toward the exits. After so many days at sea, even the faintest glimpse of solid ground exerted an almost magical effect upon the passengers.

By chance I happened to be near one of the exits and therefore reached the deck quickly. The morning was grey and misty. The cold still bit sharply in the air, while the harbour lay wrapped in a light fog that rendered its distant outlines almost dreamlike. Through the haze, however, I could make out the great figure of which so many around me had spoken during the voyage. The Statue of Liberty stood there as a dark silhouette against the pale sky.

I must confess, Watson, that I found the situation a curious one. I had imagined my arrival in New York on several occasions, but never in this fashion. To stand among hundreds of immigrants in third class and view the city as one of them had never formed part of my plans. Yet it was precisely that role which I was now obliged to see through to the end.

As I allowed my gaze to pass over the crowd around me, it quickly became clear that disembarkation would be a lengthy affair. And if there was one thing I did not possess, it was time.

Moran enjoyed several advantages that I lacked. He had traveled first class. He would be passed rapidly through the formalities. He would be ashore long before I was. While I still stood in line on Ellis Island among the thousands seeking a new life in America, he would very likely already be on his way to his first meeting in New York.

These reflections were only reinforced as the hours passed. First the ship remained motionless in the harbour for what seemed an age and then came further delays while officials and dock workers carried out their duties. When we finally reached the pier, the procedure proved every bit as cumbersome as I had feared.

The first-class passengers left the ship first. Then came second class. The rest of us were obliged to await our turn. Through the railings I could see the well-dressed travellers descending the gangways and disappearing toward the arrival areas, while we remained behind as spectators.

Only when the last of the second-class passengers had gone were the gangways opened for third class. Three long streams of humanity began to move toward the quay. Some spoke loudly and enthusiastically of the future. Others remained silent. A few wept openly. For many of them this moment represented the culmination of months, perhaps years, of hope, fear, and sacrifice.

For me, it marked the beginning of a new chapter in the pursuit of Colonel Moran.

Valmont's Cabin

As the line moved slowly forward, another problem began to press itself upon my attention. My belongings were still in Valmont's cabin. My papers were there, along with my clothing and several possessions which I could not afford to lose. Somehow, I would have to return to the ship. For the moment, however, I had no choice but to follow the flow of humanity.

When we reached land, I attempted to leave the line. The result was immediate. An authoritative official motioned me firmly back with a gesture that left no room for discussion. Later I made a second attempt to approach the area surrounding the ship, only to be stopped once more

and directed back to the queue. The situation began to irritate me more than I cared to admit.

It was under these less-than-encouraging circumstances that I caught sight of William. He was walking from the area through which the crew and second-class staff were leaving the vessel. At the distance that separated us, I could hardly attract his attention by calling out, and so I was forced to rely upon the most energetic gestures I could manage. Eventually I even resorted to the decidedly undignified step of leaving the line once again and waving so conspicuously that several nearby people began staring at me.

Fortunately, my efforts bore fruit.

I saw William stop and narrow his eyes as though trying to place me. A moment later he recognised me, and his face lit up with surprise. Within a few minutes he was standing before me. He spoke briefly with one of the employees responsible for the queues. There was pointing, explaining, and nodding, and to my considerable relief we were then granted permission to leave the area together.

On our way toward the stairway leading to first class, I caught my final glimpse—for the time being—of Moran and Camille Ardent. They had already passed through inspection and were moving toward the ferry that would carry them to the southern tip of Manhattan. Among the many people upon the pier, they would soon disappear from sight, yet during the few moments in which I could still observe them, I was struck above all by the renewed strength and confidence that characterised Moran's first steps upon the new continent.

He walked with that particular ease one occasionally sees in men who feel entirely at home in their surroundings. There was neither haste nor nervousness about him. On the contrary, he appeared to be enjoying the situation. Camille walked beside him, and even at a distance it was evident that he took pleasure in her company. She was not merely a traveling companion; she was an audience. And Moran was a man who enjoyed performing.

As I watched him, several of the events that had unfolded during the voyage began to settle into place within my mind. For a long time, I had

assumed that his intention was to sell the document as quickly as possible upon reaching New York. Yet the more I considered his character, the less likely that appeared. A swift transaction would certainly bring him money, but money alone had never been his true motivation. Like so many hunters before him, he seemed almost to value the pursuit more highly than the prize itself.

I had come to realise that the document in his possession was far more than a commodity. It was a tool by which he could control other people. So long as no one else had access to it, he remained the center of their attention. He could make them wait, create anticipation, inspire fear or hope, and allow each of them to believe that he alone stood closest to obtaining it. No—Moran did not want a quick sale. He wanted a game. And a game required multiple players.

I believe, Watson, that it was in that moment, standing among newly arrived immigrants, dock workers, and uniformed officials upon the cold pier, that I first understood the form the affair would most likely take in New York. Moran would not sell *St. Peter's Confession* to the first bidder who came along. He would create an auction around the document—not merely for the money, but because it allowed him to enjoy the peculiar power known only to the sole possessor of a coveted secret.

My reflections were interrupted by William, who led me up the stairs toward first class. It felt strange to return to the familiar corridors so soon after leaving them. The difference was that they now stood almost deserted. The passengers were gone, and many of the crew had already begun the work that follows every long sea voyage. Doors stood open, bedding was being gathered up, and in several places subdued voices could be heard as men prepared the ship for its next journey.

My own cabin remained exactly as I had left it. There I collected the items that were still necessary to me and took the opportunity to change my clothes. The Emilio disguise had long since been abandoned, but Étienne Valmont's wardrobe still remained in the trunk as a reminder of the role I had played throughout much of the voyage. I looked at the garments for a moment before setting them aside and dressing once more in

my own clothes. There was something liberating about moving without a disguise, although experience had taught me that such freedom rarely lasted long.

Moran's Abandoned Cabin

I had just finished gathering my belongings when a thought occurred to me. Why not pay one final visit to Moran's cabin?

The chances of discovering anything of significance were admittedly slight. A man of his experience would naturally have cleared away every trace of importance before leaving. Yet I had learned over the years that people often leave behind clues precisely where they are convinced none remain. Fortunately, William still had access to the necessary keys, and only a few minutes later I found myself once again standing in the cabin that Moran had occupied throughout the voyage.

My first impressions immediately confirmed my expectations. He had emptied the place with meticulous care. The drawers stood bare. No papers had been left behind, nor any personal belongings. There was not so much as a single letter, receipt, or scrap of correspondence. Everything reflected the discipline one would expect from a man who had spent years navigating a world populated by swindlers, criminals, and policemen alike.

Indeed, I was on the point of abandoning the search altogether when my attention fell upon the ashtray.

It was a small detail, easily overlooked. Several cigar stubs lay at the bottom, precisely as one would expect. Moran favoured cigars, and I had frequently seen him smoking them during the crossing. Yet among the dark remains of the cigars I noticed a single cigarette end.

I paused.

So far as I could recall, I had never once seen Moran smoke cigarettes. Camille, however, had done so on several occasions. The conclusion therefore seemed an obvious one. She had been in the cabin. Whether only once or many times I could not know, nor under what circumstances those visits had taken place. Yet the discovery was sufficient to

revive the uncertainty that had accompanied my thoughts concerning her for some time.

How close had she truly become to Moran? Had she merely been playing a role? Or had the boundary between role and reality begun to blur? The question admitted no easy answer, and I doubted whether even Camille herself could, at that stage, have given a wholly honest one.

As I carefully moved the charred remains about within the ashtray, I discovered something else. Almost concealed among the ashes lay a small, crumpled scrap of paper. It was so insignificant that it might easily have been discarded along with the rest. I unfolded it with care.

Only a single line had been written upon it: *214 West 27th Street.* Nothing more.

I read it once again and then slipped the note into my notebook. It might prove entirely meaningless. Then again, it might represent the first genuine lead that New York had offered me.

Shortly afterward I took my leave of William. As had happened so many times before, a gold coin passed discreetly from my hand into his, and he accepted it with that same mixture of dignity and gratitude that had always characterised him.

When at last I left the *Majestic* and stepped out onto the quay, the city lay before me like a new and unfamiliar board upon which the game had only just begun.

Ahead waited New York.

Manhattan

Upon my arrival in Manhattan, I secured lodgings at a modest but respectable boarding house situated on a quiet side street. It lay close enough to the center of the city to provide easy access to the principal thoroughfares yet sufficiently removed that a man might conduct his work without attracting unwanted attention. It was precisely the sort of establishment I preferred in a foreign city. Here I could receive correspondence, keep my notes in order, and observe my surroundings without myself becoming an object of interest.

From the very beginning, New York impressed me quite differently from the European cities I had visited during the course of this long affair. Paris possessed its elegance. Rome its weight of history and tradition. Even London, for all its immensity and bustle, seemed in some respects to have grown slowly and organically through the centuries. New York, however, appeared driven by an entirely different force. There was something restless about it, as though the city had not yet finished inventing itself.

From the window of my room, I could hear the unceasing noise of the streets below. Horse-drawn vehicles rattled over the cobblestones with a speed and impatience seldom encountered in London. Streetcars clattered through the larger avenues, while electric lamps cast their sharp brilliance across sidewalks and shop windows. Even after darkness had fallen, the city seemed unwilling to surrender itself to rest. Newsboys darted through the crowds, shouting the latest headlines with an energy that would have impressed even the most industrious street vendors of Whitechapel.

I have often thought, Watson, that cities reveal something of the people who build them. Rome speaks of faith. Paris speaks of culture. London speaks of empire. But New York, at least in those days, spoke above all of ambition. Everything seemed to be in motion. Everything appeared to be striving toward something greater.

214 West 27th Street

As evening approached and the practical business of the day had been concluded, I once more took out the small scrap of paper I had found in Moran's cabin. The few words still stood alone upon the page: 214 West 27th Street.

Spreading a map of the city across the table, I began examining the area more closely. The address itself told me very little. No well-known institution was associated with it, nor any public building or location that immediately aroused suspicion. Yet the more carefully I studied the neighbourhood surrounding it, the more interesting it became.

The streets were lined with theatres, music halls, restaurants, and variety establishments. It was the sort of district where people sought entertainment, where actors, businessmen, journalists, and adventurers might cross paths without attracting notice. Such places had always interested me—not because of the performances themselves, but because they so often served as meeting grounds for individuals whose true purposes differed considerably from those they presented to the world.

I set the map aside and looked once more at the address.

It was, of course, entirely possible that it meant nothing at all. It might have been a forgotten note, an insignificant appointment, or an address Camille had written down without attaching any importance to it. Yet experience had taught me that coincidences rarely survived for long in the vicinity of Colonel Moran. He seldom left traces behind him, and when one did appear, it was rarely without significance.

For that reason, I resolved to see the place with my own eyes.

There comes a moment in every investigation when one must choose between further speculation and action. The distinction between the two is often less pronounced than people imagine. A man may devise a hundred theories at his desk and still learn more from ten minutes of observation on the spot. I had studied the paper long enough. If the address concealed anything of interest, the city itself would likely tell me more than any map.

Accordingly, I left the boarding house shortly afterward and ventured into the evening life of New York, making my way toward West Twenty-Seventh Street.

The Manhattan Music Hall

I proceeded to that part of Manhattan known as Chelsea and found the address from the note without great difficulty. The building proved to be a variety theatre or music hall bearing the somewhat grandiose name ***The Manhattan Music Hall.***

Even before entering, I sensed something familiar about the place. Not because it reminded me of London, which had always possessed a character entirely its own, nor of Rome, with its heavy layers of history and

tradition. Rather, if it recalled anything to mind, it was certain districts of Paris where artists, actors, musicians, and businessmen gathered beneath the same roofs and allowed their respective worlds to intermingle.

Once inside, the impression only deepened.

Music, laughter, and conversation in a multitude of accents filled the hall. Gentlemen in dark jackets sat at small tables beside ladies who had plainly devoted considerable time to their appearance before the mirror. Upon the stage, singers, comedians, and musicians succeeded one another in rapid succession, while waiters moved noiselessly among the tables carrying trays laden with glasses and bottles.

There was, however, no sign of either Colonel Moran or Camille Ardent.

I therefore remained seated that first evening and confined myself to observation. The following evening, I returned. On the third evening I did the same.

It is one of the less celebrated aspects of investigative work, Watson, that most mysteries are not solved through sudden flashes of brilliance but through patience. Over the years I had learned that people often reveal themselves if one simply remains seated long enough. And if the voyage across the Atlantic had taught me anything, it was the value of waiting.

Thus, the Manhattan Music Hall gradually became part of my daily routine. Each evening, I arrived, ordered a pipe of tobacco and a glass of wine or ale, and took my place at a table from which I could observe my surroundings without attracting attention myself. In time the staff came to recognise me as one of their regular patrons.

My preferred table stood on the upper level beside the railing, from which I enjoyed a commanding view of the entire hall. From there I could observe the stage, the main entrance, and the bar simultaneously. Few people entered or departed without passing through my field of vision.

On the fourth evening, my patience was at last rewarded.

I was seated, as usual, at my table, watching a singer whose enthusiasm exceeded her talent by a considerable margin, when a slight stir arose near

the entrance below. It was nothing that the other patrons appeared to notice, but for me it was immediately sufficient to command attention.

Patience Rewarded

Colonel Moran had arrived, and he was not alone. Camille Ardent accompanied him.

I leaned discreetly back in my chair and watched them from a distance as they found their places at a table near the stage. It was not their presence that surprised me, for by then I had come to expect it; it was rather the manner in which Camille seemed changed. Aboard the *Majestic* she had often been attentive to Moran, almost like an actress who never quite dares to lose focus upon her fellow performer. Here there was something different about her. She appeared more relaxed, more alive, more at home.

Again, and again her gaze turned toward the stage. She followed the music. She smiled at certain lines. On more than one occasion she seemed almost to forget the man beside her altogether. It struck me that the surroundings must have reminded her of her own life in Paris. The stage, the light, the audience, the changing performances, and the constant hum of expectation—all this belonged to her world in a way that the enclosed corridors of the ship never had.

For that very reason, her conduct also caused me a certain uneasiness, for if an agent becomes too relaxed, it may be due to two very different causes. Either the person feels secure in his control of the situation, or he has begun to forget his task. I studied her for a long while without reaching any definite conclusion. There were moments when she seemed to me entirely faithful to the role she had assumed, and others when I was forced to ask myself whether human feeling had not slowly begun to mingle with the performance. Perhaps that was precisely why I found Camille Ardent so difficult to judge. Most people may be analysed through their actions, but actors live by concealing themselves behind actions designed to create certain impressions in others. Whether Camille was merely playing yet another role, or had begun to believe in it, I could not at that time determine.

I knew only that she and Moran now sat before me in New York, and that the small scrap of paper from his cabin had once again proved to be a clue worth following.

Another Old Acquaintance

Yet, my dear Watson, neither the sight of Colonel Moran nor that of Camille Ardent proved to be the evening's greatest surprise.

I had been waiting for their arrival for several days, and I had expected the address sooner or later to lead me to them. No, what truly surprised me occurred several minutes later, while I was still occupied in studying their behaviour.

My gaze drifted casually through the room and came to rest upon the bar. There stood a man who seemed familiar to me. At first, I attached no importance to it, for New York was full of faces that resembled other faces. But after another glance, a more precise memory began to stir. The man did not stand like an ordinary guest. He seemed occupied with his surroundings in much the same way that I was. He was not drinking. He was not taking part in the conversations around him. He was observing.

I had to look at him several times before I was finally able to attach the name to the face.

It was Moreau.

Almost at the same moment, he raised his head and caught sight of me. For a brief instant we both stared at one another across the room. I shall not conceal from you that I was genuinely surprised. After all that had happened in Paris and Rome, I had not expected to encounter the French art dealer in a variety theatre in New York.

The surprise, however, lasted only a moment. Moreau smiled faintly, as though he had expected that such a situation would arise sooner or later and then made his way through the room toward my table. I welcomed him, and he sat down without much ceremony. To an outsider the situation must have appeared curious: two men meeting in a random theatre in New York after having been involved in the same affair through several European cities. Yet there was nothing in the conversation that

suggested the joy of reunion. We both knew that neither of us had come there for the other.

For several seconds we merely exchanged glances. Neither of us found it necessary to explain his presence at once. There already existed a certain understanding between us. I had by no means expected to meet him precisely there, but neither did I doubt that he had a reason for being present.

It was Moreau who first broke the silence.

"I continued the matter in Paris after my release," he said quietly.

His gaze did not leave Moran.

"Not the document. Not even the forgeries as such."

He gave a slight shrug.

"The money interested me more."

I nodded. That sounded like him.

"I began following the payments," he continued. "Banking connections. Intermediaries. Art dealers. Insurance papers. The longer I dug, the clearer it became that the threads led toward America."

He let the words hang for a moment.

"And, in the end, toward New York."

There was something in the way he said it that made me understand his investigation had been almost as extensive as my own. Perhaps more so. I had followed people; he had followed numbers. And money has the advantage, Watson, that it often tells the truth when people lie.

Moreau suddenly smiled.

"You are no doubt wondering how I knew you were coming here."

I admitted that the question had crossed my mind.

He nodded discreetly toward the other end of the room.

"Camille."

My gaze followed his.

Camille was still seated beside Moran, watching the performance upon the stage.

"Before she left, she told me that she suddenly had to go to America."

He smiled faintly.

"Not why. Not with whom. But it was enough."

"So you followed her?"

"I followed the trail."

There was a considerable difference between the two formulations, and I had no doubt that Moreau had deliberately chosen the latter.

"I traveled on the same ship as you."

It was my turn to smile.

"That explains a great deal."

"In second class."

"And you did not see me?"

"Only the shadow of you."

He laughed quietly.

"Or rather, several different shadows."

For the first time that evening he seemed genuinely amused.

"I saw the steward."

He paused.

"And I saw Étienne Valmont."

Another pause.

"It took me some time to understand that both were the same man."

I could not help nodding in acknowledgment.

"So, you are not following the document," I said.

"No."

The answer came immediately.

"The document does not interest me."

He leaned slightly forward.

"It is the buyer I am looking for."

Different Trails, Different Goals

In that moment, the difference between our respective pursuits became entirely clear to me. Until then I had, to some extent, regarded Moreau as a potential ally—a man who had merely been drawn into the same chain of events as myself. Yet as we sat facing one another in the noisy establishment, surrounded by music, laughter, and the clinking of glasses, it dawned upon me that although our paths ran through the same landscape, they did not lead toward the same destination.

From the beginning, I had followed Colonel Moran. The document had stood at the center of my interest, not because of its theological significance, but because it represented the thread connecting so many of the individuals now gathered within this curious game. Moreau, on the other hand, seemed interested in the document only insofar as it might lead him toward something else. His attention was directed toward the unseen connections behind the scenes, toward the flow of money, commercial relationships, and the men who had learned to conceal themselves behind respectable businesses, galleries, and institutions.

It struck me that we resembled two hunters moving through the same forest while following different tracks. At times those tracks crossed one another, and occasionally they appeared almost identical, yet their origins were different, and perhaps their destinations as well. Whether they would converge again at some later point neither of us could know. Nevertheless, I found myself increasingly convinced that there had now been too many coincidences for our investigations to continue independently of one another for very much longer.

While these reflections occupied my mind, my attention was once again drawn toward the far end of the room.

Moran had risen from his table.

The movement was discreet enough that most of the guests would scarcely have given it a second thought, but both Moreau and I had become accustomed over the preceding months to watching precisely that man.

Camille remained seated, absorbed in the performance upon the stage, while Moran crossed the room with that peculiar self-assurance which seemed to accompany him wherever he went. Near the exit stood a gentleman whose appearance immediately aroused my interest. He was well dressed without being flamboyant, and there was something in his bearing which suggested a man accustomed to being listened to. As he stood with his back toward us, I never obtained a proper view of his face.

The conversation between the two lasted only a very short time. No papers were exchanged. No handshake sealed the meeting. No visible gesture revealed its significance. Yet there was something about the entire

scene that made it difficult to believe in coincidence. The encounter was too deliberate, too precise, and too brief to be social in nature.

I had only just begun to wonder whether the man might be one of the buyers Moran was gathering around himself when the meeting ended. The stranger remained by the door for a moment, as though wishing to assure himself that no one had paid him any attention, after which he too disappeared into the night.

Moreau and I spoke little about the episode. There was no need. Certain observations require no commentary between men working upon the same affair. I could tell from his expression that he had drawn conclusions of his own, just as I had already begun formulating mine.

When we eventually parted outside the Manhattan Music Hall and I made my way alone through the illuminated streets of New York, those thoughts accompanied me all the way back to my boarding house. The city seemed even more alive than it had earlier in the evening. Electric lamps cast their sharp brilliance across the sidewalks, streetcars rang through the darkness, and the cries of newspaper vendors mingled with the sound of horses' hooves upon the cobblestones.

Yet it was not the noise of the city that occupied my mind, but the growing realisation that the case was changing its character. What had begun as the pursuit of a single document had developed into something far more extensive. More people were involved than I had originally imagined. More interests were colliding. And behind the visible actors I now sensed the outlines of other forces which had not yet fully revealed themselves.

There remained, however, one question that continued to return.

Moreau had explained how he had come to New York. He had explained why he had continued his investigation. Yet there was one matter he had carefully avoided addressing.

How had he found this particular place?

How had he learned of the Manhattan Music Hall?

Naturally, I could prove nothing, but after our conversation I was left with a persistent feeling that the French art dealer had not yet told me the whole truth. Experience had taught me that when a man withholds

information, it is rarely the information he mentions that is most important.

It is the information he does not mention.

Watson

I set the letter aside for a moment and allow my gaze to rest upon the empty chair beside my writing desk.

It still strikes me as remarkable how often circumstances seemed to work in Holmes's favour. Naturally, he himself would have rejected such a description. Holmes did not believe in coincidence. He would have argued that most events appear accidental only to those who have not yet perceived the pattern. Even so, I could not help wondering at the chain of events that had brought Moreau, Moran, Camille Ardent, and Holmes himself to the same place in New York.

I must also confess that the reappearance of Moreau pleased me. Throughout the preceding months, the French art dealer had proved to be far more than a temporary acquaintance. He had been a valuable associate to Holmes in Paris and had on several occasions provided insights that no one else could have supplied. Where Holmes saw people, Moreau often saw the financial connections between them. Where Holmes followed actions, Moreau followed money. Together they had formed a most remarkable partnership, and I could not conceal my curiosity to see what his presence in New York would ultimately lead to.

With that thought, I open the next letter.

The paper crackles softly between my fingers, and Holmes's familiar handwriting greets me once again.

The Second Letter

January 25, 1892
New York City

My dear Watson,
The evening spent in Moreau's company had provided me with several pieces of information that seemed worthy of further pursuit. The most obvious of these was the name Rosenfeld. During the course of his investigations, Moreau had encountered it on numerous occasions—not because the man himself appeared compromised in any way, but because he had, over many years, established a reputation as one of New York's most respected collectors of manuscripts, rare books, and historical documents.

If Colonel Moran intended to assemble a circle of potential buyers around the document known as *Saint Peter's Confession*, it seemed highly probable to me that Mr. Rosenfeld would be among them. I therefore resolved to pay him a visit.

Mr. Rosenfeld's Bookshop
The following morning, I took a carriage toward the Lower East Side. After the broad avenues and more fashionable districts of Manhattan, the neighbourhood seemed almost a world unto itself.

The streets gradually narrowed, the buildings stood closer together, and the crowds grew denser with every block. The air was filled with voices from many nations, and the various languages merged into an almost continuous current of sound. English was spoken alongside Ger-

man, Yiddish, Russian, and several other tongues which I could not immediately identify.

It struck me that the district reminded me in many respects of the third-class passengers aboard the *Majestic*. Many of the people I passed were undoubtedly recent immigrants. There was the same mixture of hope, hardship, and uncertainty that I had observed during the crossing. Yet there was something more as well—a restless energy, a determination to carve out a life in the New World.

After making a few inquiries among local shopkeepers, I found Rosenfeld's establishment without any great difficulty.

The building surprised me. I had expected a bookshop—perhaps even a large one—but the place resembled a private library far more than a commercial enterprise. Through the broad windows I could see shelves extending deep into the building. Narrow aisles wound between the collections, while several doorways suggested the existence of additional rooms hidden beyond the front halls. The entire establishment possessed that peculiar atmosphere found only in places where generations of knowledge have been gathered beneath a single roof.

Upon entering, I was greeted by a gentleman of approximately sixty years of age. He was well dressed without being ostentatious, and his manner was calm. His face bore that expression of kindly seriousness so often found among men who have spent the greater part of their lives in the company of books.

"Mr. Rosenfeld?" I inquired.

The man nodded.

What followed was, at first, a conversation of the most ordinary sort. Rosenfeld spoke readily of his collections, of auctions, and of the growing interest wealthy Americans were showing in historical documents. He spoke slowly and thoughtfully, like a man accustomed to weighing his words before uttering them.

As I listened, certain details gradually combined to form a picture. There were faint traces of ink upon his fingers. Tiny remnants of leather dust clung to his cuffs. A fine scratch ran across the thumb of his right

hand. None of these things was remarkable in isolation, yet together they told a story.

"I see that you restore your manuscripts yourself."

Rosenfeld fell silent for a moment and regarded me with evident surprise—not suspicion, but rather the quiet pleasure that arises when one professional encounter another.

"That is correct," he replied with a smile. "At least some of them."

He raised his hand and examined it himself.

"I confess I believed I had concealed the evidence more effectively."

"On the contrary," I answered. "You have concealed it exceedingly well. But manuscripts leave traces of their own."

This observation appeared to please him considerably.

From that point onward our conversation assumed a more confidential tone. I inquired into the nature of his collection and asked whether it consisted exclusively of Hebrew texts.

Rosenfeld shook his head.

"Far from it. I collect anything that I find historically interesting."

He made a small gesture toward the surrounding shelves.

"My personal affection certainly lies with Hebrew manuscripts. It is difficult to deny one's origins. But the collection contains considerably more than that."

I mentioned the Vatican, medieval documents, and Christian sources. Rosenfeld answered every question willingly and described several of his most significant acquisitions.

The longer the conversation continued, the more convinced I became that Moreau's assessment had been entirely correct. If *Saint Peter's Confession* was truly to be offered among collectors, Rosenfeld would undoubtedly be a natural candidate. At length I asked whether I might look around the premises more closely.

"Of course," he replied at once.

He pointed toward a section deeper within the building.

"If church history interests you, I suspect you will find the most engaging works in that department."

With those words he left me to the books and returned to his work behind the counter while I slowly made my way among the shelves and the many thousands of silent witnesses to the past.

Colonel Moran Arrives

I had not been among the shelves for very long before events took a turn that rendered the visit considerably more interesting than I had anticipated.

The front door opened, and the small bell above the entrance gave its discreet chime. Almost instinctively, I lifted my eyes from the volumes I was pretending to examine and immediately recognised the newcomer.

It was Colonel Moran.

I remained exactly where I was.

Among the tall shelves there were several positions from which one could observe the shop without attracting attention, and I had no intention of revealing my presence. Moran, for his part, did not appear to be a man expecting to encounter acquaintances. He entered with the same calm self-assurance I had observed since his arrival in New York, and he looked far more like an experienced businessman than the hunter I had come to know over the preceding months.

Rosenfeld glanced up from his work behind the counter.

Moran approached him without preamble.

"I have been informed," he said in a lowered voice, "that you possess an interest in compromising Christian literature."

For an instant the collector appeared genuinely puzzled. The expression lasted only a moment. Something in Moran's tone or manner seemed to cause several connections to fall into place within his mind, and a slow smile spread across his face.

"I believe we should speak somewhere more private," he said.

A moment later the two disappeared behind the counter and through a door leading to the rooms beyond. The door was not completely closed. A narrow gap remained.

I set down the book and moved carefully through the aisles between the shelves—not hurriedly, but with the natural ease every experienced

observer must learn to cultivate. As I approached the doorway, I quickly discovered that the view was useless. I could see neither the men nor the table at which they must have been seated.

I could, however, hear.

Not clearly enough to follow the conversation, but sufficiently for certain impressions to reach me through the narrow opening. The sounds within the room were muted, as though both the walls and the books surrounding us sought to preserve whatever secrets were being exchanged. I heard the movement of a chair across the floor and the dry rustle of paper or parchment being transferred from one place to another. At intervals fragments of voices reached me, yet without context and without any possibility of distinguishing individual words.

I remained motionless and allowed time to work on my behalf. Many men become impatient in such situations and commit the error of seeking additional information by moving closer. Experience had taught me that patience is often the surest path to knowledge. The man who moves too much reveals himself. The man who waits often finds that circumstances provide the answers.

For that reason, it was not an entire sentence that first captured my attention, but merely two words which carried more distinctly through the silence than anything else.

"Saint Peter."

I heard nothing further, yet nothing further was required. The name alone was sufficient to remove any remaining doubt concerning the nature of the meeting. The document we had followed from Paris to Rome and across the Atlantic now lay almost certainly upon the table between the two men.

Shortly thereafter I heard a heavier movement from within the room—not the sound of ordinary papers, but something larger and more rigid being placed upon a tabletop with a degree of care that in itself spoke of its importance. I immediately pictured the sealed parchment roll. Moran was far too intelligent to open it on such an occasion. The secret itself formed part of its value. Once the contents became common

knowledge, some portion of the peculiar power the document exercised over others would inevitably be lost.

What followed was a silence that interested me far more than the few words I had overheard. It lasted long enough for me to form a fairly vivid picture of what was taking place within the room. I could almost see Rosenfeld, with the meticulous care characteristic of an experienced collector, examining the external features of the parchment—the seals, the material, the craftsmanship, and those subtle indications of age which only the trained observer can read. It seemed highly probable that Moran was not, at this moment, attempting to sell the contents of the document but rather its authenticity.

When the sound of chairs again reached my ears, I understood that the meeting was drawing to a close. I therefore withdrew among the shelves and resumed the role of an interested customer just as the door opened.

Moran emerged first.

There was nothing triumphant in his appearance. Had he concluded a sale, I believe I should have been able to detect it. On the contrary, he looked like a man who had achieved precisely what he had expected to achieve—no more and no less. His satisfaction resembled that of an experienced chess player who has successfully completed an opening move and now looks forward to the next stages of the game.

After Moran's departure, Rosenfeld remained behind the counter for several moments. He seemed almost to have forgotten his surroundings. More than once I heard him murmur to himself, and although the words were few, they were repeated with a thoughtfulness that impressed me.

"Interesting… exceedingly interesting."

It was not the voice of a man thinking only of money.

That fact particularly caught my attention. Had he been primarily a buyer, his thoughts would naturally have revolved around price, risk, and negotiation. Rosenfeld, however, appeared far more occupied with what the document might contain, what historical connections it might reveal, and what questions it might raise. I therefore began to understand why Moreau had spoken of him with a certain respect. Collectors of that type do not merely purchase objects; they purchase access to the past.

When at last I thanked him for his hospitality and took my leave, he replied politely but distractedly. His thoughts were clearly still occupied by the visit he had just received.

Outside, I paused for a moment before continuing through the crowded streets of the Lower East Side. The multitude around me seemed unchanged, yet in my own mind the visit had moved several important pieces into place.

The document remained in Moran's possession.

Rosenfeld had examined it and apparently accepted its authenticity, yet no transaction had been concluded. Even so, the significance of the meeting was obvious. There was now at least one genuine buyer, and Moran had taken the first step toward precisely the development I had anticipated upon arriving in New York.

The auction remained invisible to most. But it had begun. And who would be the next buyer?

The question followed me out into the street and remained with me as I moved through the dense quarters of the Lower East Side. I lacked neither money nor means of transportation. Cabs passed constantly, and a single motion of the hand would have been sufficient to make one of them stop. Yet I preferred to walk. There are thoughts that develop best in motion, and over the years I had learned that many of my most valuable conclusions had arisen during long walks through the streets of cities.

New York provided ample material for such reflections. Around me the crowd surged forward like a living current. Voices in English mingled with German, Yiddish, Russian, and several other languages which I could not immediately identify. Street vendors shouted their wares, children ran between the adults, and from open doorways came the smells of food, tobacco, and coal smoke into the cool air. It was a world far removed from London’s more restrained rhythm, yet at the same time it possessed, in its own fashion, that same energy which always arises where human beings are searching for opportunity.

The Catholic Church

The document concerned Saint Peter, the early Church, and the first centuries of Christianity. Who could have a greater interest in such a document than the institution which, through the centuries, had built its authority upon precisely that history?

The answer suddenly seemed so obvious to me that I was almost irritated with myself for not having formulated it earlier. The Catholic Church. Of course.

If the document truly contained something of significance, the Church must necessarily wish to know its contents. Whether it wished to preserve it, examine it, or perhaps prevent its publication, I could not yet know, but its interest seemed inevitable.

With that realisation, the next question immediately presented itself. How was I to proceed?

My thoughts turned first to Moreau. His connections and experience could no doubt prove useful. Yet almost in the same instant I dismissed the idea. It was not Moreau I needed to find. It was Moran. If I wished to know his next move, I first had to find him again.

I continued some distance through the press of people while allowing my thoughts to work onward. Slowly the answer began to take shape. Moran was, in many respects, a man of habits. He sought new surroundings yet returned again and again to the places where he felt at home. He enjoyed an audience. He enjoyed the stage. He enjoyed being noticed, even when he pretended otherwise.

And for precisely that reason I suddenly knew where I must look: the Manhattan Music Hall.

By now it had become more than a theatre. Camille felt at home there. Moran enjoyed the atmosphere. Wealthy men, collectors, art dealers, and ambitious businessmen moved through the place regularly. If he wished to mingle among potential buyers without attracting unnecessary attention, I could scarcely imagine a more suitable setting. It was there that the next act of his performance would begin.

Holmes and Moreau Meet

The Manhattan Music Hall was already full when I arrived. Music

flowed out across the room from the stage, where the first performer of the evening was well underway, and between the tables the waiters moved with a routine that plainly showed the place seldom stood still for long. Voices mingled with laughter, glasses clinked against one another, and at several of the tables business was conducted with the same natural ease with which private conversation might have been carried on elsewhere.

I let my gaze travel through the room. There was no sign of either Moran or Camille. Nor of Moreau. Nevertheless, I felt strangely certain that at least one of them would appear.

I took my place at the table which had by now become my fixed point of observation, ordered a drink, and allowed time to work on my behalf. I did not have long to wait. I heard the sound of a chair being drawn out on the opposite side of the table, and when I raised my eyes, Moreau was already seated before me. He possessed that particular ability to move through a room almost unnoticed.

For a moment we merely regarded one another. Neither of us appeared especially surprised. In a certain sense we had both expected the meeting.

"I had not expected to see you," I said.

A faint smile appeared on his face.

"I had."

"Indeed?"

He nodded toward the room around us.

"If you truly believe in your auction theory, Holmes, then this is precisely where I would look."

I could not help smiling. For the first time since our acquaintance in Paris, I felt that we were regarding one another as equal investigators rather than as the man with the case and the man who had happened to be drawn into it.

Moreau leaned slightly forward.

"I have found something."

"A buyer?"

"Not yet."

He shook his head.

"But a connection."

I waited.

"A church connection."

He let the words linger for a moment.

"St. Patrick's Cathedral."

I did not answer at once.

The music continued around us as though the city were wholly indifferent to the questions that occupied me. From the stage came laughter after a successful line, and somewhere farther down the hall glasses were raised noisily in a toast. The waiters moved between the tables with their trays, while the audience came and went in that constant flow which seemed to be New York's very nature.

Moran was probably somewhere out there in the city. Perhaps with Camille. Perhaps on his way to another meeting. Perhaps even already placing another piece upon the board in the game which none of us had yet fully understood.

Moreau and I spoke for some time longer, but without getting much farther. He had told me all he knew. His inquiries had led him to St. Patrick's Cathedral, and there, for the moment, the trail stopped.

When at last he rose to leave, we exchanged a few practical remarks concerning the coming days, after which he disappeared into the crowd.

A Greater Surprise

I remained seated. A fresh cup of coffee was placed before me, and as the smoke from my pipe rose toward the ceiling, I allowed my thoughts to wander freely. The performance upon the stage continued. The music changed in character. The audience reacted, laughed, applauded, and spoke together in subdued voices. Several guests left the room while others arrived.

Time slipped forward without my really noticing it, and for that very reason the next event took me wholly by surprise. A shadow fell across the table. I raised my eyes and saw Camille Ardent standing before me.

If my meeting with Moreau earlier that evening had surprised me, the feeling was stronger now. She stood for a moment and regarded me with

a small smile, as though she already knew my thoughts better than I did myself.

"So, you are still alive, Mr. Sigurdsson."

There was both warmth and humour in her voice.

I could not help smiling in return.

"I certainly hoped you had made it."

"I might say the same of you," I replied.

"As I recall, traveling in your company was not entirely without risk either."

She laughed softly.

"I shall choose to take that as a compliment."

Without further ceremony she drew out a chair and sat down. There was something about Camille that made invitations unnecessary. She moved with the same natural assurance away from the stage as she did upon it.

For several minutes we spoke of ordinary matters: of New York, of the city's restless energy, and of the peculiar way in which Americans seemed to wish to experience everything at once. She spoke of the audiences at the Music Hall, and I told her of my first impressions of the city. More than once the conversation moved naturally toward the differences between Europe and America.

"The American audience reacts more quickly," she said. "If they are bored, one senses it at once. If they love something, one senses that at once as well."

"And which do you prefer?" I asked.

She considered for a moment.

"Paris listens better," she replied. "New York reacts more strongly."

She looked around the room.

"And yet this place reminds me of home."

I followed her gaze across the hall. There was indeed something European about the establishment, not in its appearance, but in its atmosphere. People did not come here merely to be entertained. They came to meet, discuss, observe, and be observed.

"You miss Paris," I said.

A small smile appeared again.

"At times."

She fell silent for a moment while the music from the stage rose and fell around us.

"But one must be careful about missing too much," she continued thoughtfully. "Some people spend so much time longing backward that they overlook the place where they actually are."

There was something in her tone that made me look more closely at her. She seemed more relaxed than at any time during the crossing. Something about the surroundings appeared to return her to a world that was truly her own. The light from the stage, the music, the changing performances, and the attention of the audience formed an environment in which she moved with a naturalness I had seldom seen in her before.

It struck me once again how difficult she was to judge. Most people sooner or later reveal their true nature through their habits and reactions. An actress, however, lives by concealing precisely such things. Each time I believed I had understood Camille Ardent, she showed me another side of herself, and I was left to wonder whether the previous one had ever been genuine at all.

Perhaps that was why I found myself more attentive to her words than to the conversation itself. She spoke easily of New York and of the difference between American and European audiences. She made a few witty remarks about the city's restless pace and seemed genuinely amused by the people who came and went around us. Nothing in her tone suggested that she wished to speak of documents, secret meetings, or Colonel Moran. On the contrary, any casual listener might have believed us merely to be two acquaintances who had happened upon one another.

Yet I sensed an undercurrent in the conversation. Nothing tangible, only the faint impression that her attention was not wholly fixed upon what we were discussing. On more than one occasion her gaze drifted toward the cloakroom at the far end of the room, not long enough to seem suspicious, but long enough for me to notice it. It seemed to me that she was waiting for someone, or perhaps rather wishing to assure herself that someone had not yet arrived.

When the conversation gradually began to ebb, she turned her eyes once more in that direction. Only then did she look back at me with an expression I never entirely learned to interpret.

"I think," she said thoughtfully, "that tomorrow I shall visit a place where the soul may find a little more peace."

The remark seemed so detached from what had preceded it that I immediately took note of it.

"That sounds unusual," I replied.

A small smile appeared on her face. There was neither laughter nor irony in it, but rather that discreet amusement a person may feel when knowing a little more than one's companion.

"Even actresses need forgiveness from time to time."

She said it lightly, almost carelessly, yet the words remained hanging between us. Before I could reply, her gaze once again moved toward the cloakroom, and this time she rose.

"I must not keep people waiting."

No explanation followed. No names were mentioned. No further hints were given. She merely nodded briefly to me and moved through the room with the same elegance that had made her a success upon the Parisian stages. A moment later she disappeared among the guests and passed from my sight.

I remained seated for some time. The music continued around me, and upon the stage a new performance had already begun. The audience laughed and applauded in the proper places, as though nothing unusual had occurred.

Thoughts on the Way Home

When later I left the Manhattan Music Hall and stepped out into the illuminated New York evening, her words returned to me again and again. The city hummed around me with its accustomed energy. Electric lamps cast their light across the sidewalks, streetcars rang through the streets, and the cries of newspaper sellers mingled with the sound of horse-drawn carriages upon the cobblestones. Yet above all that noise, her voice still sounded in my thoughts.

A place where the soul may find peace.

Even actresses need forgiveness.

Perhaps it was a message. Perhaps it was merely another role among many. But by the time I finally returned to the boarding house, I had already made my decision. The following day I would seek out the place toward which her words so clearly pointed and attempt to determine whether, behind her enigmatic smile, there lay yet another clue in the affair.

St. Patrick's Cathedral

My dear Watson, I shall not conceal from you that Camille Ardent's words followed me through most of the night. Several times I attempted to persuade myself that I was assigning them too much significance, yet each time I returned to the same conclusion. If the remark was a message, it pointed toward the Church. If it was not a message, it would cost me very little to examine the matter more closely.

The following morning, therefore, I resolved to visit St. Patrick's Cathedral.

For the first time since arriving in New York, I made use of a more extensive disguise. During the course of the journey, I had adopted several identities, but all of them had been connected to particular social roles. This time I chose something simpler and, at the same time, more effective.

I dressed as a monk. Not in any conspicuous fashion; quite the contrary. The strength of the disguise lay precisely in its anonymity. In ecclesiastical surroundings, such a figure would attract far less attention than a curious stranger who spent hours observing his environment.

Shortly afterward I arrived at the cathedral. Even to a man who rarely allowed himself to be impressed by architecture, the building made a certain impression. The high vaults lifted the eye upward, and the light that fell through the stained-glass windows cast a subdued glow across the stone floor. People came and went in a quiet stream. Some were priests. Others were tourists. A few had plainly come to pray, while

others seemed merely to be seeking a moment's peace amid the unrest of the great city.

I took my time in orienting myself within the cathedral. Experience had taught me that every place possesses its own rhythm, and that this rhythm must be understood before one can understand the people who move through it. I therefore did not hurry. I allowed myself to drift slowly through the nave, stopping here and there to observe the coloured windows, the lofty pillars, and the visitors who came and went with very different purposes. Some sought silence. Others sought beauty. A few, no doubt, sought God. I, as usual, sought something rather more earthly.

After lighting a candle, I found a position from which I could command a view of much of the church interior without attracting attention to myself. The disguise performed its work admirably. A monk seated quietly in a cathedral aroused no interest, and for that very reason I could afford to be patient.

My thoughts still circled around the question of the Catholic Church's role in the affair. If the Church truly desired the document, it would hardly send an ordinary priest. The matter was too sensitive and the potential consequences too great. The value of the document lay not merely in its age, but in the possibility that it might affect the understanding of the Church's earliest history. Such a task would necessarily be entrusted to a man of considerable authority.

It was in that connection that my attention fastened upon the elderly man seated among the front rows. Not because there was anything demonstrative about him. It was precisely the absence of any desire to make himself conspicuous that made an impression upon me. The man sat with the natural ease possessed only by those who have, for many years, been accustomed to responsibility and decisions. The red vestments left no doubt as to his rank, and I marked him at once as the most likely representative of the Church's interest. I took a seat a few rows behind him.

The Presentation

People came and went around us. Some knelt in prayer. Others remained

only a few minutes before vanishing once more into the noisy streets of New York. I sat motionless with my head bowed, and as the minutes lengthened into nearly an hour, my attention gradually came to rest more upon sounds than upon sights.

Thus, I detected the arrival long before I saw it. A set of heavy footsteps moved through the church with a calm, measured certainty. There was no hesitation in the gait, no uncertainty, and no weakness of age. On the contrary, the movement revealed a man who still possessed both strength and control. Instinctively I estimated his weight at around two hundred pounds and at once imagined a person with a military background or a similar discipline.

Almost at the same time another set of footsteps sounded. These were lighter, quicker, and more elegant. They moved with that rhythm which often characterises women accustomed to being observed. The combination was so distinctive that my thoughts immediately turned to Moran and Camille.

I maintained the appearance of devotion, but my attention sharpened. The two sets of footsteps approached together until the lighter ones suddenly stopped. One person had remained behind somewhere outside my field of vision. The other continued alone toward the cardinal.

Only then did I permit myself a brief glance.

My suspicion was instantly confirmed. It was Moran.

The Colonel seated himself beside the cardinal with the naturalness of a man whose meeting had already been arranged in advance. What interested me almost as much as the meeting itself, however, was Camille's absence. She had accompanied him to the place, but not to the negotiation. That told me something of her role. She was part of the game, but not part of the actual transaction.

I lowered my eyes again and let my hands rest before me like those of a man in prayer.

Shortly afterward I heard the cardinal's voice.

"Do you have the document?"

The question was asked without preamble.

"Naturally."

Moran sounded as calm as ever. The sound of a bag being opened followed the reply. Something was taken out and placed between the two men. I raised my eyes discreetly just long enough to see the cardinal receive the parchment roll.

After several minutes of examination, the cardinal nodded.

"It is correct."

The document was handed back.

Then came the question for which I had been waiting.

"And the price?"

Moran did not answer in words. Instead, he extended a small note. The cardinal's gaze passed over it, and although his face scarcely changed, I nevertheless detected the faintest reaction. Perhaps the sum was higher than expected.

I did not yet know. I knew only that the cardinal's next question came without hesitation.

"Where may I reach you?"

"I shall send word."

Nothing more was said.

A few moments later Moran left his seat. Shortly afterward I again heard the lighter steps which I had earlier identified as Camille's, and together they disappeared from the cathedral.

When silence had once more settled over the church interior, I remained seated for some time. I had not obtained every answer I desired, but I had obtained the most important ones. The Church was interested. The document had been accepted as genuine. And most importantly of all, Moran had made it clear that he still retained control.

There were several buyers.

The Third Letter

January 28, 1892
New York City

An Anonymous Invitation

My dear Watson,
The following days passed without any events that immediately deserve mention. I spent them becoming better acquainted with New York. Its waterfronts, its financial districts, its libraries, and its streets each told their own story, and I gradually came to understand why men such as Moran and his unknown buyers felt so much at home here.

There are cities built upon tradition. New York is built upon opportunity. Everything appears to be in motion. Everything seems possible. Wealth is created and lost with a speed that would have appeared almost inconceivable in London or Paris. It is therefore a city that attracts both visionaries and swindlers, often in such a mixture that it becomes difficult to distinguish one from the other.

One afternoon I spent several hours among the ships, warehouses, and immigrants of the harbour district before returning to my boarding house. There a small surprise awaited me. The proprietor handed me a folded piece of paper which had been delivered during my absence, without further explanation and without the sender's name.

It proved not to be a letter but a newspaper clipping, carefully cut out and folded, as though the person who had left it wished to draw my attention to one particular piece of information and nothing else.

I seated myself by the window of my room and unfolded the paper. It was an advertisement for a performance that evening at The Manhattan Music Hall. Amid the usual details concerning music, performers, and guest appearances, one name immediately caught my attention.

Camille Ardent.

In itself, this was perhaps not surprising. She was an actress, and the stage was her natural element. What was more remarkable was that this particular advertisement had been brought to my attention in so discreet a fashion.

I turned the clipping between my fingers and examined it more closely. The printing ink appeared fresh, and the characteristic smell of newly printed newsprint had not yet entirely faded. Even without further investigation, it seemed likely that the clipping had been taken from that day's newspaper. Certain turns of phrase and typographical details suggested a French-language publication, which only made the matter more interesting.

For a moment I considered the most obvious possibilities. Moreau might have sent it. The former investigator possessed both motive and opportunity. Yet Camille herself might just as easily have been the sender. Such a gesture would have been entirely in keeping with her peculiar manner of communication. She rarely offered direct instructions. Instead, she preferred to allow others to draw their own conclusions.

Leaning back in my chair, I allowed my gaze to rest upon the clipping. Whoever had sent it clearly desired my presence. That alone was sufficient to arouse my interest.

Camille Ardent Performs

When darkness later began to settle over the city, I therefore made my way once more to The Manhattan Music Hall, curious to discover whether the evening would provide a new clue or merely add yet another question to the many that already surrounded Camille Ardent.

Even upon arrival I sensed that this evening differed from my previous visits. The Music Hall hummed with its customary vitality, yet it was a different sort of audience that had gathered within its walls. The small

tables were occupied by men and women who wore their wealth with the particular ease that accompanies many years of financial success. The conversations around me revolved less around art and entertainment than around investments, real-estate ventures, and new commercial enterprises. At several tables I heard the names of banks, railway companies, and construction firms discussed with the same enthusiasm that other people reserve for novels or theatrical productions.

It occurred to me that New York was, in many respects, a city in which even pleasure assumed the character of business.

I found my usual seat and allowed my gaze to travel about the hall. The musicians upon the stage were making their final preparations, while waiters moved among the tables carrying trays laden with glasses. There was as yet no sign of either Moran or Moreau, but I had long since learned that such observations cannot be hurried. Patience is often the most important element of any investigation.

When the lights dimmed and the performance began, my attention was soon drawn toward the stage.

Camille Ardent had impressed me before, yet this evening her talent seemed greater than ever. Perhaps it was the setting. Perhaps it was because I had now witnessed enough of her many faces to appreciate the extraordinary nature of her gift. Upon the stage she moved from one character to another with a facility that seemed almost supernatural. The uncertainty of a young woman became the resignation of an aging one. Bitterness transformed itself into humour. Sorrow became hope. Hope became cynicism. The audience followed her effortlessly through these transformations, and I was forced to admit, somewhat reluctantly, that even my own attention was at times entirely captured by the performance.

Only after some time did my gaze begin once more to wander through the hall.

In one of the front rows sat Moran.

This did not surprise me.

What immediately attracted my interest, however, was the man seated beside him.

I had noticed him before, though only in passing. This evening I had the opportunity to study him more carefully. He appeared to be in his late fifties, well dressed without extravagance, and possessed of the erect bearing often found in men who have spent their lives making decisions on behalf of others. He spoke rarely. He moved rarely. Yet somehow the room itself seemed to bend ever so slightly around him.

It was not the authority of an aristocrat, but something newer. Something distinctly American. Authority derived from money rather than inheritance.

I noticed that Moran appeared unusually attentive to the man's reactions. Not deferential—far from it—but attentive. Like an experienced card player who has not yet revealed all of his cards, yet is already evaluating the hand of his opponent.

When the intermission arrived, the audience rose in small groups. Voices once again filled the hall, and waiters hurried between the tables. Amid this movement I caught sight of a familiar figure making his way purposefully through the room.

Moreau.

There was something in his expression that immediately told me he had not come for the entertainment.

Without preamble he seated himself and leaned slightly across the table.

"I know him," he said quietly.

I followed his gaze.

"The man sitting beside Moran?"

Moreau nodded.

"Not personally. Through my investigations."

Nathaniel Ashcroft

He then began, slowly and methodically, to unfold the picture he had assembled during the preceding months.

The man's name was Nathaniel Ashcroft.

The name was known throughout much of New York. He owned land, hotels, industrial enterprises, and investments that extended far

beyond the city itself. Newspapers described him as one of the new American millionaires. To the public he appeared as a visionary builder and philanthropist.

Yet Moreau's interest lay elsewhere.

As he spoke, I gradually began to appreciate the extent of the network the former investigator had uncovered. Considered individually, each incident seemed insignificant. A painting of questionable provenance in Paris. A collection that changed hands under obscure circumstances in Amsterdam. Rare manuscripts that suddenly appeared in the possession of private collectors in Vienna and Rome. Each case could be explained. Each case could be dismissed.

Yet when Moreau placed these seemingly unrelated events side by side, a pattern slowly began to emerge.

It was not one of those patterns that immediately reveal themselves to the investigator. Quite the opposite. Each incident was so minor that it would scarcely have attracted serious attention on its own. A painting of uncertain origin in Paris. A collection changing ownership under questionable circumstances in Amsterdam. A manuscript appearing inexplicably in the possession of a private collector in Vienna. Every story could be justified. Every transaction could be defended. Yet it was remarkable that all of them appeared to point toward the same circle of individuals.

Moreau spoke calmly and methodically as he described the connections he had uncovered over the course of many months, and I was obliged to admit that his work resembled my own in many respects. Where I had followed the document and the people who physically handled it, he had followed the movement of money. He had approached the matter from the opposite direction and had nevertheless arrived at the same landscape.

Nathaniel Ashcroft.

The name appeared again and again.

Not necessarily as owner or seller, but as a figure in the background whose influence seemed to extend far beyond anything revealed by official records.

For a moment I sat in silence and allowed my gaze to drift toward the man who still sat only a few tables away beside Moran. He did not resemble the sort of collector I had imagined. There was nothing scholarly about him. Nothing suggested the love of books and history I had encountered in Rosenfeld. Nor did he resemble the cardinal, whose interest arose from the Church's responsibility toward its own past.

On the contrary, he struck me as the sort of man who viewed the world in the same manner that an entrepreneur views a parcel of land: as something to be acquired, developed, and ultimately added to his holdings.

Perhaps that was why Moreau's next remark made such a strong impression upon me.

Leaning slightly forward, he allowed his eyes to rest upon Ashcroft for a moment.

"He does not buy art," he said quietly.

I waited while he allowed the words to linger between us.

"He buys history."

There was something about the phrase that immediately lodged itself in my thoughts. I began to understand precisely what Moreau meant. For a man such as Rosenfeld, an ancient manuscript possessed value because of its contents. For the Church, it possessed value because of its significance. But for men such as Ashcroft, the value lay elsewhere.

The document was a symbol.

A trophy.

An object that no one else could possess.

Something that could be placed among his other acquisitions as yet another demonstration of his reach and power.

While these reflections passed through my mind, the performance continued upon the stage. Camille Ardent moved effortlessly through yet another of her monologues, and the audience followed her with admiration. Yet the longer the evening progressed, the more clearly it became apparent to me that the true performance was taking place elsewhere in the hall.

Several times I observed Ashcroft's attention drift away from the stage and toward Moran. Not conspicuously. Not for long. But often enough that the pattern became unmistakable.

It was not the gaze of a man being entertained.

It was the gaze of a man making an evaluation.

Their conversation was sparse, their movements controlled, yet beneath the surface I sensed the same tension I had previously observed between skilled card players whenever the stakes became sufficiently high. Neither wished to reveal too much. Neither wished to appear overly eager. Yet it was obvious that both understood precisely why the other was present.

When applause finally filled the hall at the conclusion of the performance, they rose almost simultaneously. I followed them with my eyes as they moved through the room and out into the night.

Something about the manner in which they departed struck me.

They walked like two experienced players who had just opened a game.

Only when the door had closed behind them did Moreau turn back toward me.

"If my theory is correct," he said quietly, "then we may finally have found the man we have been searching for."

I did not answer immediately.

I had begun to feel that the document was slowly ceasing to be the center of the case. It still lay upon the table as the visible stake, yet around it now moved men whose ambitions extended far beyond a single parchment.

And among them, Nathaniel Ashcroft suddenly stood forth as the most enigmatic of them all.

The Fourth Letter

February 1, 1892
New York City

The following morning, Moreau and I met over an early breakfast at a small café not far from my boarding house. There was something unusual about him that day. It was not merely the satisfaction of a man who believed he had advanced a step further in his investigation, but rather an almost youthful anticipation which I had never before observed in the otherwise composed Frenchman. He waited until the waiter had removed our plates before leaning slightly forward across the table.

"I believe," said he, "that the time has come for you to become somewhat better acquainted with Nathaniel Ashcroft."

"Personally?" I asked.

A faint smile crossed his face.

"Not yet. But we shall begin by moving through his world."

He would say no more, and a short while later we found ourselves in the streets amid the already bustling activity of a New York morning. Streetcars rattled along the broad avenues, carriages rolled over the cobblestones, and the flow of pedestrians seemed almost as dense as at midday in London. The city possessed a restless energy to which I had not yet fully accustomed myself. Everywhere one saw construction, demolition, commerce, and investment. It was as though the entire city had been seized by a collective conviction that tomorrow must inevitably be greater than today.

Without offering any substantial explanation, Moreau guided me through several districts until at last we came to a halt before one of the most impressive buildings I had yet seen in New York.

The hotel rose above the street like a monument to wealth and ambition. Its broad façade was constructed of pale stone, while its tall windows glittered in the morning sunlight. Uniformed doormen received arriving guests, and through the great glass doors one could glimpse an interior that resembled a palace far more than a hotel.

"It belongs to him," said Moreau.

"The hotel?"

"He built it."

We entered.

Even I, who am rarely impressed by material splendour, was obliged to admit that the place made a considerable impression. The floors were of marble, the columns richly decorated, and the light from enormous chandeliers fell across the lobby with an almost theatrical effect. Everywhere servants and guests moved silently through surroundings clearly designed to proclaim success.

Moreau, however, spent little time admiring the setting. Drawing out his watch, he opened the cover and studied the hands.

"A quarter to eleven," he said. "He should be here at any moment."

We found seats in one of the hotel's more secluded lounges. Moreau appeared perfectly at ease, as though the meeting had already been arranged down to the smallest detail. I began to realise that during the many months of his investigation he had built a network of contacts of which I knew only a very small part.

Only a few minutes had passed before a man approached our table. He was in his early fifties, well dressed and impeccably groomed, yet there was a weariness in his face that could not be concealed by either a careful shave or respectable clothing. He introduced himself politely and took a seat at Moreau's invitation.

"Mr. Hargreaves," said Moreau. "Formerly an administrator here at the hotel."

The man nodded.

"Formerly is indeed the correct word."

There was a trace of dry humour in the remark, though it quickly faded.

The conversation began cautiously with questions regarding the construction of the building and the history of the hotel. Hargreaves spoke willingly enough, yet as the discussion gradually approached Nathaniel Ashcroft, his tone altered almost imperceptibly. He described the enormous sums that had been invested in the project and the uncompromising manner in which deadlines had been enforced. Nothing was permitted to delay the work. Nothing was allowed to stand in the way of the opening.

"Men worked day and night," he said. "If one contractor could not keep pace, another was found."

"And the labourers?" I asked.

For a moment he hesitated.

"They worked hard."

There was something in the phrasing that caused me to study him more closely.

"Very hard," he continued after a pause. "Particularly the immigrants. Italians. Poles. Russians. Many of them did not fully understand the contracts. That made matters easier."

He allowed the words to linger.

I said nothing. Instead, I listened with the close attention that long experience has taught me to employ. Yet I noticed that my eyes never entirely left the man's face.

As the conversation progressed, a picture slowly emerged of a businessman who constantly operated along the edge of what was permissible. Contracts were altered. Suppliers were pressured. Competitors were manoeuvred out of the market. Nothing sounded directly illegal, yet much of it appeared undeniably ruthless.

What interested me, however, was not the information itself but the man who supplied it. For although Hargreaves no longer worked for Ashcroft, and although he clearly harboured a degree of bitterness regarding his dismissal, I sensed something else beneath his words. Some-

thing that resembled fear. It reminded me of the peculiar respect—or perhaps awe—which powerful personalities are capable of inspiring long after their direct authority has vanished.

More than once Hargreaves found himself lowering his voice whenever he mentioned Ashcroft's name. More than once he glanced around as though instinctively wishing to ensure that no one was listening. By the time he finally rose to leave, I was left with the distinct impression that we had learned far more about Nathaniel Ashcroft through the man's fear than through his actual words.

Moreau had plainly reached the same conclusion. Only after Hargreaves had disappeared through the lounge door did he lean back slightly in his chair.

"Interesting," he said quietly.

"The construction project?"

Moreau shook his head.

"No. The man."

For a moment he remained silent.

"He is still afraid of Ashcroft."

I nodded slowly.

"That was my conclusion as well."

The Empire

When we left the hotel, we continued on foot through the city. It seemed to me that Moreau had chosen this method deliberately. A carriage would have been faster, but it would also have concealed much of what he wished me to see.

New York possessed a curious character during those years. The city did not merely appear to be growing; it seemed to be expanding in every direction at once. New buildings rose everywhere, while older districts disappeared with a speed that would have seemed almost violent in Europe. Amid this constant transformation I gradually began to understand what Moreau had been attempting to suggest.

Several times during our walk he paused briefly and pointed toward a building.

"That one."

A little later he repeated the gesture.

"And that one."

A few streets farther on came another.

At first, it appeared random, but gradually the pattern became unmistakable. A hotel. An office building. A department store. An administrative complex. All connected, in one way or another, to Nathaniel Ashcroft.

I began to appreciate the true scale of the man.

He did not merely own properties. He owned portions of the city itself.

There was something almost invisible about such a form of power. A police commissioner can be seen. A general can be seen. Even a bank president occupies an office that may be pointed out. But Ashcroft's influence was dispersed throughout the streets around us. It revealed itself in the bricks, the façades, the businesses that rented space in his buildings, and the thousands of people who worked each day in structures bearing his name.

"He is unquestionably ambitious," I remarked as we crossed a broad avenue.

Moreau allowed his gaze to travel upward along a newly erected building whose upper stories were still hidden behind scaffolding.

"Ambition alone is not a crime."

"Precisely."

"No," he continued, "but ambition often tells us where to look for motive."

He fell silent for a moment as we continued through the crowds.

"Most wealthy men buy things."

"And Ashcroft?"

A faint smile touched the corner of his mouth.

"He builds hotels, offices, companies, foundations, and institutions. He builds connections. He builds networks. He builds his own legacy. Money is merely the tool."

I found the observation intriguing.

"You believe that his true goal is fame?"

"Something greater than fame."

Moreau stopped for a moment and turned toward me.

"Immortality."

The word hung between us with an almost solemn weight.

"You think I exaggerate," he continued calmly. "But look around you. Every one of these buildings will probably still be standing here long after both you and I are gone. Ashcroft knows it. He does not build for his own age. He builds for posterity."

I was obliged to admit that the thought possessed a certain logic. Throughout history, many men had sought precisely this. Kings had raised cathedrals. Princes had built palaces. Industrialists now erected skyscrapers and cultural institutions. The means changed, but the desire remained the same: to leave an imprint so deep that time itself could not erase it.

Our walk gradually brought us toward a more open part of the city, where the traffic thinned and a number of newer buildings dominated the street. Here Moreau stopped again. Before us stood an impressive complex built of pale stone, with broad steps and tall columns. The building was far more elegant than the commercial houses we had passed earlier. Its architecture was deliberately monumental, as though it wished to signal something beyond mere practical usefulness.

"We have arrived," said Moreau.

I raised my eyes toward the façade.

Large bronze letters above the entrance announced that the place was both a museum and a cultural center.

People came and went through the broad doors. Students, scholars, well-dressed gentlemen and ladies, school groups, and ordinary visitors mingled in a stream that gave life to the place without disturbing its dignity.

"Another of his projects?"

"The most important one."

I turned toward Moreau.

"More important than the hotels?"

"Far more important."

His gaze rested upon the building with a thoughtfulness I had not previously observed in him.

"Hotels make money. Office buildings make money. But this..." He gestured toward the high columns. "This serves another purpose."

"And what is that?"

"This is where Nathaniel Ashcroft is attempting to persuade history that he deserves a place within it."

For a moment we both stood silent.

I now understood why Moreau had wished me to see the man's world before drawing conclusions about his role in the affair. If the document was truly as significant as every sign suggested, it might very well be more valuable to a man like Ashcroft than to any other buyer.

Not because of its price. Not even because of its contents. But because the ownership of something so unique would add yet another stone to the monument he seemed determined to raise to himself.

At Closer Range

The museum proved even more impressive than I had imagined. Over the years I had visited several private collections, university libraries, and national museums throughout Europe, but there was something particular about this place. Perhaps it was because the institution was still young. It did not bear the dust and tradition of centuries, as the old European collections did. On the contrary, it seemed to have been created with the characteristic confidence of the New World. Here one found not merely art and history gathered together but ambition itself.

We moved through long halls filled with paintings, sculptures, and historical objects from many different countries. Several times Moreau stopped and discreetly pointed out particular works. His knowledge of the collections was plainly far greater than I had imagined.

Before a large oil painting by an Italian master, he lowered his voice.

"This picture was missing for many years."

I studied the canvas.

"Stolen?"

"That is a matter of definition," he replied dryly. "It disappeared under unclear circumstances. No one knew exactly where it was. Then it suddenly appeared here."

A little later he stopped before another work and told me a similar story. In one place, a private collection had changed hands without any great public attention. Elsewhere, individual objects had been separated from their original collection. Everywhere there were small fragments of stories which, taken separately, seemed innocent enough, but which together suggested a more complicated picture.

It struck me how thoroughly he had worked. While I had followed people and events, he had spent months tracing the journeys of works of art through banks, auction houses, intermediaries, and private collectors. His trail did not consist of footprints or witness statements, but of provenance lists, insurance papers, and financial connections.

After some time, we were introduced to one of the museum's conservators, an elderly man with sharp eyes and that peculiar caution in his movements which often belongs to those who work daily with fragile objects. He willingly showed us around.

To me, many of the works looked merely like well-preserved paintings or documents. Yet under the conservator's guidance, the differences began to emerge. He pointed out areas where layers of paint had been reconstructed in unusual ways. He showed us traces of restorations that did not follow customary methods. In a few places he even hinted that certain works were hardly as old, or as original, as the public was led to believe.

Moreau listened with an attention so intense that it almost made him forget my presence. Several times he asked detailed questions, and the conservator answered with the cautious precision that experts often employ when approaching controversial subjects.

At last, the conservator led us through a newer section of the complex and stopped with a slight smile.

"You have chosen a good day for your visit."

"Indeed?" I asked.

"The new wing is to be inaugurated this afternoon. Mr. Ashcroft himself will be present."

Moreau and I exchanged a quick glance. We would have an opportunity to study the man at close range.

As the afternoon advanced, the museum gradually began to fill with guests. Businessmen, university men, connoisseurs of art, and politicians mingled with one another, while servants moved silently through the halls with trays and glasses.

When Nathaniel Ashcroft at last appeared, I immediately understood why so many people found him fascinating. He was not the sort of man who dominated a room by physical size or loud behaviour. On the contrary, his strength was of a subtler kind. He moved with the calm assurance that so often belongs to those accustomed to being listened to.

At one point we were introduced. Moreau presented us as men interested in art and European collections, and Ashcroft received us with polite interest. If he had any notion of who we truly were, he gave not the slightest sign of it. On the contrary, he immediately guided the conversation toward subjects that plainly occupied him. He spoke of Italian manuscripts, of the importance of monasteries in preserving the texts of antiquity, and of the differences between European and American collections. Several times he quoted authors and historians with a precision that surprised me. I was obliged to admit that the man was far more cultivated than I had expected.

The same impression seemed to make itself felt upon Holmes.

When Ashcroft later moved on through the hall, surrounded by his guests, we continued our walk among the many visitors.

Moreau appeared almost frustrated. He had expected to find a villain. Instead, he had encountered an intelligent, articulate man with an apparently sincere interest in culture.

After some time in silence, Holmes turned toward him.

"I must be honest, my friend."

"Yes?"

"I am still not convinced."

Moreau looked at him questioningly.

"Of what?"

Holmes let his gaze travel through the great hall, where Ashcroft now stood surrounded by professors, art historians, and collectors.

"That Nathaniel Ashcroft is the man we are looking for."

Watson

I sit for a moment with the letter in my hands and allow my gaze to rest upon the date at the top of the page. Something about it makes me pause. Through the preceding weeks I have followed Holmes's correspondence almost day by day, yet here the sequence suddenly seems not quite to fit.

I set the letter aside and draw the stack closer. It would not be the first time that one of Holmes's papers had found its way into the wrong folder or slipped among other documents over the years. Nevertheless, I feel a small stab of unease. The thought that certain letters might have been lost does not please me. Too often have I seen how great an importance even the smallest detail could assume in Holmes's narratives.

With greater care, therefore, I begin to go through the bundle chronologically. After some time searching, I discover the explanation. Three letters have simply hidden themselves behind the others. I cannot help smiling a little at myself. There is a certain irony in the fact that, after so many years, I can still experience the same relief at finding a missing document that Holmes himself might have felt upon discovering an overlooked clue.

Once order has been restored, I set the three letters aside and take up the next in the sequence. I turn it for a moment between my fingers before breaking the seal.

This particular letter interests me more than most.

The meeting with Nathaniel Ashcroft had left Holmes in an unusual position. That, at least, is how I remember it as I sit here many years later. He had met a man who, on paper, ought to have awakened suspicion, yet who in practice had proved far more difficult to place. I had often observed, through our many cases, that at a certain point in an investigation Holmes began to shift his attention. Clues, documents, and technical details remained important, but his true interest gradually

turned toward the people themselves. It was as though he eventually arrived at the realisation that every case, in the end, concerns character more than objects.

A document might be stolen. A fortune might be moved. A murder might be committed. Yet behind each of these actions stood a human being, and it was there, ultimately, that the truth had to be found.

With that thought, I open the letter and begin to read.

The Fifth Letter

February 5, 1892
New York City

My dear Watson,
After the days spent in Moreau's company and our investigations into Nathaniel Ashcroft, I felt a need to return to the other players in this strange drama.

Ashcroft had proved far more complex than I had expected. It was possible that Moreau was right in his suspicions, but if that was the case, the explanation would have to be sought somewhere deeper than in the man's public appearance. I therefore decided to set him aside temporarily and instead refresh my impression of the two persons who had already had direct contact with the document.

I thought of Rosenfeld and of the cardinal, and I chose to begin with Rosenfeld.

The Warning
The journey to the Lower East Side became, in its own way, a passage between two different worlds. Only a few days earlier I had moved through Ashcroft's New York—a world of marble, monumental buildings, hotel palaces, and cultural institutions erected with apparently unlimited means. Now my steps led me back to the more crowded districts, where the streets seemed to possess a life of their own among small shops, workshops, bookshops, and apartments piled one above another.

There was something about the district that reminded me of certain parts of London. Not because the places resembled one another directly, but because both bore the marks of people who worked, traded, and lived in close proximity. Yet the difference was unmistakable. Everywhere one heard new languages, new accents, and new dreams. The city seemed younger than any European capital, as though it were still in the act of inventing itself.

I was still a few streets from Rosenfeld's shop when the first hint of trouble appeared.

A small group of people had gathered farther along the sidewalk. Not many, but enough to catch my attention. Their conversation had that peculiar quality which often gathers around a recent event—curiosity mingled with speculation.

As I approached, I saw the shattered window.

The glass had long since been swept away, but the opening was still covered by temporary boards, and even from a few yards' distance I caught a faint smell of something burned.

I stopped for a moment, then continued toward the window. The shop appeared at first to be closed, but beyond the tall shelves I could make out movement. A figure passed slowly through the room.

It was Rosenfeld.

Even at that distance I could see that something had changed since our last meeting. The calm, almost academic dignity which had marked him only a few days before seemed to have been replaced by weariness. His shoulders had sunk a little, and there was something anxious in his movements.

I knocked at the door.

It took some time before he came forward. When at last he unlocked it and drew it slightly open, he seemed for a moment uncertain who I was. Then he recognised me.

"Ah, the Icelandic gentleman," said he, with a faint smile that quickly disappeared again.

His glance moved briefly toward the damaged window.

"You come at a less than fortunate moment."

I looked past his shoulder into the half-darkened shop.

"It seems to me," I replied, "that someone else has already had the same thought."

"Has there been a burglary?"

The question came naturally as I allowed my gaze to move through the room. Rosenfeld hesitated for a moment, as though he were still trying to gather his thoughts after the incident.

"It is difficult to say," he answered. "The police do not believe that was the intention. They think someone threw a bottle through the window."

He led me farther into the shop and pointed toward the damaged area.

"A bottle containing a flammable liquid. That was their conclusion. Fortunately, the fire was discovered almost at once."

His eyes moved toward the front door.

"A neighbour saw the smoke and understood immediately that something was wrong. When no one answered, he broke open the door to get inside."

I followed his gaze. Even without closer examination, it was plain that the lock had been subjected to considerable force. The wood around it was splintered, and the hinges bore the marks of violent treatment.

"He came in time," Rosenfeld continued. "A few more minutes, and it might have developed quite differently."

There was no exaggeration in his voice. On the contrary, he spoke with the sober seriousness of a man who had only afterward understood how close he had come to disaster.

"Fortunately, the damage is limited," he added. "Far less than it might have been."

"Will you permit me to examine the place a little more closely?"

"Of course."

He said it almost absently. His thoughts still seemed to circle around the fire, and perhaps even more around what might have happened if the neighbour had not intervened.

I therefore began my own examination without further questions.

A few fragments of glass still lay along the wall. The police had evidently taken the most important pieces with them, but small remnants

had been overlooked. I bent down and picked up one of them. There was still a faint odour clinging to the glass—not strong, but sufficient to confirm that a flammable liquid had indeed been involved. I then let my gaze travel over the floor, where the dark marks left by the fire could still be discerned. The liquid had spread quickly after impact, but the flames had not had time to develop fully.

The direction of the throw interested me as well.

I moved to the window and considered the angle. The bottle had been thrown with considerable force, but with no great precision. Had the aim been to destroy a particular object or a particular area of the shop, the result would probably have looked rather different.

At last, I went to the door and studied the damaged fittings more closely. They corresponded quite well with Rosenfeld's explanation. Someone had broken in to save the place, not to plunder it.

Only when I had formed a preliminary impression did I turn again to the proprietor.

"Have you ever been subjected to anything similar before?"

Rosenfeld slowly shook his head.

"Not once."

"And have there been similar incidents in the neighbourhood?"

"No."

This time his answer came without hesitation.

"I have asked around. No one can recall anything of the kind."

I studied him for a moment.

"What about enemies, Mr. Rosenfeld?"

The question seemed genuinely to surprise him.

"Enemies?"

He repeated the word as though it were foreign to him.

"There will naturally always be customers who are more or less satisfied with a transaction. That is true of any business. But actual enemies?" He shook his head again. "No. I can quite honestly think of none."

The interesting thing was not his words, but the manner in which they were spoken. Over the years I had learned that people conceal the truth in many different ways. Some answer too quickly. Others become

defensive. Still others attempt to steer the conversation away from the uncomfortable subject. Rosenfeld did none of these things.

It therefore seemed increasingly likely to me that if this fire truly had been directed at him, then he did not yet know the reason himself. And it was precisely that thought which slowly began to lead my reflections in another direction. For if the primary purpose had not been to destroy his shop, what had the intention been?

I let my gaze travel toward the broken window and the modest fire damage along the wall. The longer I considered them, the less they resembled a genuine attempt at destruction, and the more they resembled a message.

"It seems to me," I said after some silence, "that if the true intention had been to destroy your shop, the perpetrator would have chosen a far more effective method."

Rosenfeld looked at me inquiringly.

"What do you mean?"

I allowed my eyes once more to move through the room. The black marks on the wall, the broken window, and the limited damage formed, in my judgment, a very particular picture.

"That it does not look like an attempt at destruction."

"No?"

"No. Rather like an attempt to attract attention."

The words hung between us for a moment. Rosenfeld stood quite still. I could almost follow his thoughts as they worked their way through the possibilities.

At last, he said slowly, "You mean… a warning?"

"It is certainly a possibility we should not exclude."

For the first time since my arrival, his anxiety seemed to change its character. Until now he had mainly appeared shaken by the incident itself. Now he began to consider the cause behind it.

I allowed him to think for a moment before I continued.

"When I visited you some days ago, another gentleman was present."

His gaze lifted at once.

"Yes."

"You spoke together in the back room."

A faint nod.

"Of course. I remember him very well."

"That gentleman wished to sell you something."

"Yes."

An almost involuntary interest entered his voice.

"A most unusual object."

"But the transaction was not concluded."

"Not yet."

I noticed the small addition. Not yet. Those were not the words of a man who had rejected the offer. They were the words of a man who was still considering it. I allowed another moment to pass.

"Have you considered the possibility," I said, "that someone wishes to prevent that transaction from ever taking place?"

If my earlier remarks had made an impression upon him, the effect now was far stronger.

His face changed visibly—not because he became afraid, but because understanding was at last beginning to arrive.

At no point had I had the impression that Rosenfeld was an intriguer. On the contrary, he seemed to me a learned man who lived among his books and manuscripts and rarely thought in terms of power games. Only now did he appear to realise that the document might have drawn him into a conflict extending far beyond ordinary dealings between collectors.

"That..." he began slowly. "That had not, in fact, occurred to me."

His gaze moved involuntarily toward the damaged window.

"But it would explain a great deal."

"Possibly."

He nodded quietly to himself.

"Yes. Possibly."

There was no more to be said.

I thanked him for his time and took my leave.

Comparing Information

I was still occupied with these reflections when the door of the café opened and Moreau stepped in from the street.

He saw me almost at once. There was always something purposeful in his movements, as though he rarely wasted time orienting himself more than was necessary. He greeted me briefly, made his way between the closely set tables, and sat down opposite me just as a waiter passed and inquired after his wishes. Moreau ordered coffee, laid his gloves upon the table, and then leaned slightly forward.

I noticed at once that he looked tired. Not exhausted but marked by that particular form of weariness which follows several days of concentrated work and investigation, when the results have not yet entirely justified the effort.

I decided not to waste time.

"Have you found anything?" I asked.

The coffee was set before him, and he waited until the waiter had moved on before answering.

"I have spent the last few days following various trails among art dealers, collectors, and potential buyers. Not only the people we already know, but also others who might conceivably take an interest in a document of that caliber."

He took a sip of coffee.

"And the more I examine the matter, the more convinced I become that the document has already become a subject of conversation among the right people."

"So, the rumours are spreading?"

"Yes. But in an interesting way."

I raised an eyebrow.

"How so?"

"As though no one really knows anything concrete, yet everyone knows a little."

He allowed the words to hang for a moment between us.

"That is precisely the sort of situation which makes wealthy collectors restless. When something may exist. When no one knows exactly where it is. When only hints are allowed to escape."

I nodded thoughtfully.

It sounded unmistakably like Sebastian Moran.

"He is creating his own publicity," said I.

"Exactly."

Moreau leaned back.

"It is almost admirable. He has not merely found a document. He has turned the document into a story."

His remark made me think once more of Rosenfeld's shop, of the shattered window and the fire.

"And if someone wishes to stop the story?" I asked.

Moreau looked at me searchingly.

I then chose to acquaint Moreau with my experiences earlier that day.

"Rosenfeld has received a warning."

Moreau stopped in the middle of a movement.

"A warning?"

"An incendiary bottle through his window."

His face grew serious.

I gave him a brief account of the visit, the fire, and my conversations with the bookseller. When I had finished, he sat silent for some time, his gaze fixed upon the tabletop.

"So," said he at last, "we have at least three possibilities."

I nodded.

"I have reached the same conclusion."

He raised his eyes.

"The cardinal."

"Yes."

"If the Church wishes the document hidden, a campaign of intimidation might be one means."

"Possibly."

"And Ashcroft."

I nodded again.

"If he wishes to remain the sole buyer."

Moreau drummed his fingers lightly against the edge of the table.

"And finally, Moran."

At this I raised my eyebrows.

"That possibility seems to me less likely."

"Not impossible."

"No," I admitted. "Not impossible."

Another cup of coffee was served, and for a moment our conversation was interrupted. Only when the waiter had disappeared again did Moreau continue.

"There is still something I do not understand."

I waited.

"Why Rosenfeld?"

He leaned back.

"If Moran truly wishes to sell the document, he must know that Rosenfeld can never compete with the others."

I did not answer immediately. Instead, I lit my pipe and let my gaze drift out through the window. A streetcar was just passing, and its bell sounded faintly through the glass. Moreau was right. From the point of view of an ordinary dealer, Rosenfeld made no sense. But the more I thought of Moran, the less he seemed to me an ordinary dealer.

"You are mistaken in one assumption," I said at last.

"Indeed?"

"You assume that Moran wants money above all."

"Does he not?"

"Yes."

I slowly blew out the smoke.

"But perhaps not yet."

Moreau looked at me searchingly.

I thought of the stories Moran had told during the crossing. Stories from India. Stories of hunting. At the time I had taken them for ordinary anecdotes from a man who wished to entertain his company. Now they seemed more revealing.

"Have you ever met a true hunter?" I asked.

Moreau smiled faintly.

"Several."

"Then you also know that the prey is rarely the only object."

He nodded slowly.

"The hunt itself."

"Exactly."

Moreau fell silent. I could see the thought working its way through his mind.

"So, Rosenfeld..."

"...is not interesting because of his money."

I leaned forward.

"He is interesting because of his name."

For the first time that morning I saw genuine understanding in Moreau's eyes.

"Of course."

"Rosenfeld is respected. He is known among collectors, historians, and men of books. If he shows interest, the document immediately becomes more significant."

"He legitimises it."

"Precisely."

"Moran did not visit him in order to sell the document," I continued. "He visited him in order to open the sale."

Moreau leaned a little farther forward.

"To let the rumour spread?"

"Precisely."

Now he too began to nod.

"So, all those people who have since heard of the document..."

"... have heard of it because Moran wished them to," I concluded.

A small smile passed over Moreau's face.

"Then the auction has already begun."

"Yes," I replied. "It probably began on the very day he showed the document to Rosenfeld."

For a moment we both allowed the thought to settle.

Once the events were viewed in that light, they suddenly seemed far more logical. Moran had not been moving aimlessly through New York. He had not hesitated to sell. On the contrary, he had created exactly the

situation he desired. The rumour had been permitted to grow. Curiosity had spread. Potential buyers had become aware of one another.

He had set the market in motion. Yet precisely for that reason, the next thought became all the more troubling. Moreau was the first to put it into words.

"And someone may be trying to stop the auction."

I laid down my pipe and watched the smoke rise slowly toward the ceiling. That thought had followed me ever since my visit to Rosenfeld. If the fire had truly been a warning, perhaps it had never been aimed at the bookseller alone. It might just as well have been aimed at anyone who was considering taking part in the sale, anyone who might get the idea that the document was within reach. Perhaps the intention was not to destroy the document, but rather to ensure that it never came onto the market.

After some time in silence, our conversation naturally returned to the question which we both knew lay behind all the others. Rosenfeld's broken window and the failed arson were interesting in themselves, but only insofar as they pointed onward toward something larger.

"If you are right," said Moreau, letting his fingers move around the coffee cup, "and if this truly was a warning, then it must necessarily be repeated."

Moreau nodded slowly.

"Then the next logical step is the cardinal."

I had to admit that the thought had already crossed my mind during my visit to the bookseller. If someone wished to influence the outcome of Moran's little auction, it would be natural to continue the pressure against the other interested parties.

"Either he will be pressured," said I, "or he will react himself."

"Both would be interesting."

I looked at him inquiringly.

"As an art dealer, I have dealt over the years with monasteries, ecclesiastical funds, religious collections, and private collectors with strong connections to the Church. Not necessarily high-ranking clergy, but the

people around them. Secretaries. Administrators. Advisers. The persons who often know more than they themselves realise."

He smiled faintly.

"A cardinal is difficult to reach. But those around him are often far easier."

I had to admit that this was a perspective to which I myself had not had access. My own approach would probably have been more direct, and therefore more visible.

"You mean to find out whether the Church is still interested?"

"Yes."

"And whether anyone has tried to influence the process?"

"Precisely."

For a moment we both sat silent. The plan seemed simple, but it is often the simple plans which prove most valuable. Many investigators make the mistake of believing that complicated mysteries require complicated solutions. Holmes had taught me the opposite over the years.

Moreau rose.

"Two days."

I nodded.

"Two days."

He gathered his gloves from the table and put on his coat. Then he left the café and disappeared into the stream of people.

I remained seated. The coffee before me had long since grown cold, but that did not trouble me. Through the window I could see New York continuing its ceaseless life. Streetcars rattled past. Carriages forced their way through the traffic. Men with folders under their arms hurried between offices and meeting places. The city seemed never to stop.

Dear Watson,

I spent the following days chiefly on foot in the streets of New York. After my meeting with Nathaniel Ashcroft, it was no longer enough for me merely to know the man's name or the extent of his fortune; I wished to understand him. There are men whose actions spring from simple motives, and others whose driving forces are far more difficult to separate from their character. Ashcroft seemed to me to belong to the latter class.

I therefore often moved in the vicinity of the buildings and institutions connected with his name. It was impossible not to be impressed by their scale. Hotels, offices, cultural institutions, and whole neighbourhoods seemed in one way or another to bear the mark of his ambitions. Everywhere I found signs of wealth, organisation, and influence, but not necessarily signs of crime. On the contrary, it seemed to me more than once that the stories I had heard through Moreau stood in curious contrast to the picture which the city itself presented.

I could, of course, see the ambition and the desire for recognition. I could also see the almost American urge to set one's name upon the world. Yet I still could not see the document's place in that picture.

What was Nathaniel Ashcroft's fundamental motive for acquiring it?

The Cardinal's Departure

The question followed me for several days, and I must confess that I had come no nearer to an answer when, two days later, I once again took my seat by the café window to meet Moreau.

Even as he stepped through the door, I sensed a change in him. His usual calm assurance was still present, but it now seemed accompanied by a gravity which told me that his inquiries had not led him where he had expected.

He sat down without ceremony, ordered coffee, and came almost at once to the point.

"I have tried to find the cardinal."

"And?"

He slowly shook his head.

"It proved more difficult than expected."

He explained how he had first sought him in the places where one would naturally look for a man of the cardinal's rank. No one, however, had seen him. He received no visitors. He had no public appointments. Several persons merely assumed that he was working privately on ecclesiastical matters.

The longer Moreau examined the affair, the more unusual the situation appeared to him. At last, however, he had found the explanation. The cardinal was no longer in New York. He had departed.

"Boston," said Moreau. "That was the explanation I finally received."

I slowly shrugged. I had almost expected it.

Yet taken together, the facts were beginning to form a pattern.

Moreau leaned forward.

"So only one buyer remains."

Again, he leaned across the table.

"Perhaps the time has come to meet him."

I looked at him. There was something about the proposal that seemed both daring and natural, perhaps because the thought had already passed briefly through my own mind.

"Moran?"

"Yes."

He paused for a moment.

"He is no longer hiding. He moves about with the confidence of a man who believes the whole city belongs to him. If we show ourselves openly, if we let him understand that we know his role in this game, it may create precisely the uncertainty he does not expect."

I had to admit that the idea had its advantages. Moran had held the initiative until now. Perhaps the time had come to remind him that others, too, could move pieces upon the board.

"And where do you suggest this meeting should take place?"

Moreau smiled.

"The Manhattan Music Hall."

Naturally.

"Let us meet there this evening," said Moreau.

I nodded. It is time that Moran be reminded that he is not the only hunter in New York.

The Manhattan Music Hall

Camille Ardent was once again upon the stage that evening. She was just bringing one of her monologues to its close, and it was evident that

in a remarkably short time she had won a New York audience which already regarded her as one of the great attractions of the place. Her voice filled the room with the same ease I had seen her command in Paris, and around her the guests sat almost silent, held by her ability to pass between moods, ages, and personalities as though several people spoke through the same figure.

When the performance reached its interval, the room changed character almost instantly. People rose from their seats, chairs were pushed back, and the quiet concentration which had prevailed during the performance gave way to that particular restlessness which always follows an intermission in a theatre. Guests moved toward the bar, the cloakroom, and the smoking areas, while the conversations gathered into a continuous murmur that lay across the room like a coverlet.

It was in the midst of this movement that I saw Moran.

He stood some distance away among the guests, apparently engaged in casual conversation with a pair of acquaintances. Nothing in his appearance seemed unusual, but suddenly his gaze moved across the room and stopped at our table. I had time to register a brief flash of surprise before it vanished again, and almost at once it was replaced by a smile which seemed to me far more interesting. It was not a tense or watchful smile. On the contrary, he appeared almost amused, as though our presence afforded him an unexpected pleasure.

Moran anticipated our intentions. He moved through the room and, without any invitation, drew out a chair and seated himself with us with that air of complete self-possession which belongs only to men of uncommon confidence. First, he nodded to Moreau, then to me.

"New York seems to attract old acquaintances," said he.

I had no interest in politeness and went straight to the matter.

"I recently visited Mr. Rosenfeld."

A faint lift of the eyebrows was his only immediate reaction.

"Indeed?"

"His shop was subjected to an attempted arson."

I held his gaze.

"Indeed?" Moran repeated.

"That is most regrettable."

Dear Watson, I have seen many men lie over the years. I have seen criminals play the innocent, swindlers play the injured party, and murderers play the mourner. Few men, in my experience, were more accomplished in deception than Colonel Moran. Nevertheless, in this instance I was inclined to believe that his surprise was genuine.

Moran leaned slightly forward across the table.

"And the cardinal?"

"He is said to have gone to Boston," Moran replied.

This time the silence lasted longer.

He let his gaze rest upon the tabletop, as though considering the information, before he slowly answered:

"That was not my understanding."

It was at that very moment that another piece began to move in my mind. If Moran was speaking the truth — and I had an increasing impression that he was — then he was hardly behind either the attack upon Rosenfeld or the cardinal's sudden disappearance. Both events would then have to be explained in some other way, and that thought led almost inevitably to a far more interesting conclusion: that there was another actor in the affair, a person attempting to influence the auction, influence the buyers, and perhaps even influence Moran himself.

Perhaps the same thought reached him as well. He leaned back and regarded me with a look more difficult to read than usual.

"I can assure you gentlemen," said he calmly, "that if someone is trying to frighten my buyers away, I am at least as interested in an explanation as you are."

"And whom do you yourself believe to be behind it?" asked Moreau.

A slow smile spread over Moran's face. Now he reminded me of the man I had met aboard the Majestic: the hunter, the player, the man who seemed most alive when the outcome was still uncertain.

"If I knew the answer," said he after a brief pause, "I should already be on my way there."

None of us answered at once.

Nor did Moran seem to expect it. Instead, he remained seated a moment longer, his eyes fixed upon me. There was something searching in that look, as though he were attempting to assemble a number of scattered observations into one complete picture. I had noticed this quality in him several times before. He was far more intelligent than his reputation as a soldier and adventurer suggested.

Then he spoke again.

"You have followed me for a long time, Mr. Sigurdsson."

His voice was almost thoughtful.

"Paris. Rome. New York."

He let the words hang between us.

"And the same ship."

I said nothing.

Something was plainly working behind his calm exterior. Perhaps he was trying to connect Sigurdsson with Étienne Valmont. Perhaps he was trying to connect both with a third person. Perhaps he was still only halfway through the reasoning. Whatever he had found, he chose not to share it.

Instead, he merely nodded very slightly.

"We shall meet again, no doubt."

Then he rose, wished us a good evening with the same courtesy as though we had been old friends, and disappeared among the guests until the crowd swallowed him.

For some time neither Moreau nor I spoke. We both followed the direction in which he had vanished, as though expecting him suddenly to appear again.

At last Moreau broke the silence.

"He did not know."

I nodded slowly.

For a moment I looked at the many people around us, while the sound of voices, glasses, and music once more began to fill the room.

"You are right," I continued. "He did not know."

The Sixth Letter

February 10, 1892
New York City

A Remarkable Performance

Dear Watson,
That same morning, I received a handwritten invitation which, in itself, was so brief that it seemed almost enigmatic. It was signed by Camille Ardent and contained only a few lines:

I believe this play will interest you both.

There was nothing more.

When I later went to The Manhattan Music Hall that evening, the atmosphere was different. One could sense the change even outside. There were more carriages than usual, and among the arriving guests I noticed a greater number of people who did not appear to belong to the place's ordinary audience: artists, journalists, theatre people, and persons with that peculiar mixture of self-consciousness and curiosity which so often marks those who make their living by observing other people.

Inside, the hall was filled almost to the last seat. Conversation hummed through the room like a constant background fabric, and everywhere small groups stood speaking together with that expectant energy which arises when the rumour of something unusual has run ahead of the event itself.

I arrived before Moreau and found a table with a good view both of the stage and of most of the guests in the room. Shortly afterward he appeared.

A Puppet Theatre

After a few moments of subdued expectation, the lights in the hall were lowered, and the last murmur of conversation gradually died away. A single spotlight came on above the stage, the curtain slid aside, and the audience was given a view of what, at first glance, looked like an ordinary theatre behind the scenes.

There were painter's trestles, sets under construction, tables with manuscripts, and costumes hanging from racks along the rear wall. In the midst of it all, a group of actors moved about in what was clearly meant to represent the preparations for a new performance. Yet after only a few seconds it became clear that there was something unusual about the production.

From the ceiling, almost invisible threads descended toward each of the figures on the stage. They were fastened to arms, shoulders, backs, and heads in such a way that the audience at once understood them as living marionettes. The effect was remarkable. The actors did not move unnaturally, but only stiffly enough that one was constantly reminded of the presence of the strings. Every turn of the head seemed guided by an unseen hand, and every gesture was carried out with the precision one sees in people performing well-learned routines without any longer considering them.

The first scene of the play followed the playwright, a serious gentleman with round spectacles and a stack of papers under his arm. He sat at a table and went through page after page, while in a monotonous voice he read instructions to the others.

"Page thirty-four must be shortened."

"The scene is moved to the second act."

"The third line is repeated."

His voice was almost without feeling, and each time he spoke, the other actors reacted instantly, as though the words were being translated

into movement through the visible strings. The audience laughed several times at the exaggerated obedience, but beneath the laughter one could already sense the more serious undertone of the piece.

Shortly afterward, attention shifted to the costume workshop. There two women worked with measuring tapes and rolls of fabric around a young actress. They measured, cut, and sewed with mechanical efficiency, while their dialogue consisted of repeated standard phrases.

"The sleeves are shortened."

"The colour is changed."

"The buttons are moved."

"The hat is adjusted."

There was something almost musical in the rhythm of their work. The lines fell with the same precision as machines in a factory hall, and yet the execution was so elegant that one could not help being fascinated.

In another part of the stage stood the stage manager surrounded by musicians. He beat time with a small baton and conducted the rehearsal with the same impersonal efficiency as the other figures. When a violin entered a little too late, the error was corrected at once. When a horn played too loudly, it was subdued. Nothing was left to chance. The music became better and better, but at the same time one felt a strange lack of life. Everything functioned, but nothing flourished.

Thus, the performance continued through a series of small scenes, in which each person performed his role with great precision. The actors rehearsed their lines, the musicians practiced their parts, the set builders raised walls and staircases, and the playwright made his corrections. All worked toward the same goal. No one resisted, and no one asked questions. It was precisely this uniform obedience which gave the play its peculiar force.

I had not regarded the performance as an allegorical work, nor as an attempt at social criticism. What caught my attention, Watson, was something far simpler. I found it impressive how precisely the production managed to reproduce the feeling of a system in which every part functioned impeccably, and in which that very perfection slowly began to seem disturbing.

The Second Act

When the curtain once more slid aside for the second act, the scene was, at first glance, almost unchanged. The theatre troupe stood exactly where the audience had left them at the end of the first act. The playwright still sat at his table with the scattered papers before him, the costumers worked among rolls of fabric and measuring tapes, the musicians sat at their instruments, and the actors continued their rehearsals as though nothing had happened.

Only one new figure had appeared.

The clown.

He entered with his enormous pair of scissors resting across his shoulder and moved among the working figures with the same carefree merriment as before the interval. The audience laughed at the very sight of him. He greeted the hall with exaggerated bows, let the scissors snap dangerously shut a few inches from his own face, and sprang about with the childlike delight which only the best comic actors can present without appearing strained.

While the laughter still sounded among the tables, he began his true work. Without drama and without any solemn announcement, he simply went over to the nearest of the marionettes and cut one of the thin strings. The actor did not react. He merely continued his task. The clown shrugged, as though he himself found this odd, and went on to the next. Another string fell silently to the floor. Then another. Slowly he wandered through the entire ensemble.

The farther he went, the more the expression of the stage began to change, though so gradually that the change almost escaped notice. The movements lost some of their stiffness. The voices became less monotonous. The fixed rhythms began to dissolve, as ice slowly yields to the first warmth of spring. What was immediately interesting was not only that the actors became free, but what they did with that newly gained freedom.

All of them still appeared occupied with precisely the same task that had filled their world in the first act. The new performance was still to

be staged. The sets were still to be built. The costumes were still to be sewn. The music was still to be rehearsed. But where the work had earlier seemed a mechanical process, it now began to resemble a collaboration among human beings.

One actor suggested a change to a scene and was immediately answered by a colleague, who built further upon the idea. A musician attempted a new interpretation of a theme, which made the stage manager stop, listen, and then nod in approval. The costumers began to discuss their work with a liveliness that had not previously been present, and several times their remarks provoked spontaneous laughter among the others. It was still the same theatre troupe, and yet the atmosphere had been transformed.

I remember particularly one scene in which the playwright, in the first act, had sat like a kind of silent ruler over the text. Now he suddenly stood surrounded by the others, who suggested changes, improvisations, and new formulations. At first, he seemed almost horrified by this development, but gradually he himself began to take part in the conversation, until at last he laughed louder than anyone.

By this point the audience was completely absorbed.

The laughter came more often. Applause broke out several times spontaneously in the middle of the performance. What had begun as a comic idea about marionettes and strings had developed into something far more interesting. One sat with the strange feeling of witnessing a kind of experiment, in which the same people carried out the same task before and after their liberation, and yet the difference was unmistakable.

When the completed performance was finally presented as the play's concluding result, it was clear to everyone in the hall that it far surpassed the version which the first act had promised. Not because the goal had changed, but because the way toward it had changed its character.

The applause was still ringing through the hall when the curtain slid together for the last time before the stage. All around us people rose, some to seek the bar, others to discuss the performance with their companions, and everywhere there sounded that particular murmur which

arises when an audience feels that it has witnessed something more than mere entertainment.

Moreau seemed genuinely delighted. I do not think I had seen him so relaxed since our first meeting in Paris. He leaned back with a smile that had not yet left his face, and when Camille Ardent shortly afterward appeared at our table, he received her with a warmth quite free of the suspicion which had otherwise marked so many of our earlier conversations.

She herself seemed satisfied. Not triumphant, as one sometimes sees artists after a successful performance, but with the quiet pleasure that follows when something has been received approximately as one had hoped.

"You must accept my congratulations, Miss Ardent," said Moreau. "I expected an interesting performance. I did not expect anything so fully realisable."

She thanked him with a small nod.

"I must admit," he continued, "that in many ways I recognised something of my own work in it. The whole process of art and creation. One can almost feel the difference between people who carry out a task because they must, and people who do it because they wish to."

Camille smiled.

"I am glad you saw that."

"It was difficult to overlook."

She laughed softly.

"Believe me, many overlook it all the same."

Holmes had listened without interrupting. He sat with his fingers lightly folded before him and regarded her with that particular attention which always told me that his thoughts were working farther ahead than the conversation itself.

"And what do you yourself find most interesting in the play?" he asked.

The question seemed to surprise her a little. Not because she had not considered the answer, but rather because she had to choose between

several possible ones. For a moment she let her gaze move toward the stage, where a few stagehands had already begun to clear away.

"Most people naturally notice the strings," she said at last. "And the moment when they are cut."

She looked briefly at Moreau.

"That is also the part the audience likes best."

"And understandably," Moreau interjected. "It is the great turning point of the performance."

"Yes," she replied. "That is where the laughter comes. That is where freedom comes."

She was silent for a moment.

"But it is not really the part I myself find most interesting."

Holmes said nothing.

"The remarkable thing," she continued, "is not that the strings are cut. The remarkable thing is what happens afterward."

She leaned forward a little.

"The clown naturally represents rebellion. Or freedom. Or the desire to escape control. One may interpret him in many ways. But once he has done his work, something curious happens."

She smiled.

"No one leaves the project."

Moreau nodded slowly. It was clear that the thought had already interested him during the performance.

"Yes," he said. "I noticed that as well."

"They all remain."

Her gaze moved between us.

"The playwright remains. The musicians remain. The actors remain. The costumers remain. No one goes away. No one begins something on his own. No one throws the whole thing aside."

She gave a slight shrug.

"They continue precisely the work they were already doing."

"But in another way," said Holmes.

"Exactly."

A brief silence fell between us.

"So they are still governed?" asked Holmes.

Camille let the question hang for a moment.

"Not in that sense."

She slowly shook her head.

"There is no longer anyone guiding their hands or determining their movements."

"But?"

For the first time that evening, she seemed to consider her words with particular care.

"Perhaps the secret lies in the fact that they have made the common purpose their own."

She said no more.

I let my gaze wander through the room. At a table some distance away sat Moran. He seemed scarcely to have followed the performance at all, for his attention was fixed instead upon a circle of men who did not resemble theatre people. There was something businesslike about them, something purposeful, and the conversation at the table appeared serious. More than once I noticed how Moran spoke in a low voice while the others listened.

Shortly afterward Camille excused herself. There were other guests waiting, other obligations, and other conversations, and, as so often before, people seemed to gather around her almost without realising it themselves. She rose with a friendly smile, thanked us for our company, and disappeared once more into that circle of artists, actors, businessmen, and curious admirers which seemed to follow her wherever she went.

Moreau and I remained seated for some time. Neither of us felt any immediate need to break the silence. The conversation with Camille had left us with more thoughts than answers, and at the same time her play still worked somewhere in the background of the mind. I do not think either of us, at that moment, fully understood why it had made so strong an impression upon us. We knew only that, in some manner, it had given words and images to something of which we had as yet perceived only the outlines.

When we later stepped out into the street, we were met by the cool air from the harbour and by the sight of the city still living with almost undiminished force. Before us lay Manhattan bathed in electric light. The bells of the streetcars sounded between the rows of houses, horse-drawn carriages rolled through the traffic, and people still moved through the streets in a stream which seemed to have neither beginning nor end.

We walked for some distance without saying much. There were moments during my journey when silence seemed more valuable than conversation, and this was one of them. We were both occupied with our own reflections. The sounds of the city surrounded us but reached only halfway into consciousness.

I remember clearly the feeling of that evening. It seemed to me that Miss Ardent had indeed spoken of a play and of artistic freedom, yet as we walked through the illuminated streets it became increasingly clear that neither Moreau nor I was any longer thinking of the piece as theatre.

We were thinking of Ashcroft and of Moran, of the invisible bonds which seemed to connect them all, and somewhere in the background of my thoughts there began slowly to form the suspicion that Miss Ardent's marionettes had perhaps dealt far more with something beyond the stage than with the stage itself. Perhaps she had, without herself knowing it, given us the key to understanding the game in which we now stood.

After we had walked for some time, Moreau suggested that we sit somewhere. We found a café with large windows looking out upon the street, where one could sit in peace and at the same time feel oneself part of the city's human current. The room was half full. A pianist played softly in a corner, and the subdued murmur of conversation mingled with the sound of porcelain and coffee cups.

We found a table by the window. I lit my pipe while Moreau ordered coffee for us both. He still seemed occupied by the performance, and it did not surprise me that he was the first to bring it up again.

"That image was extraordinary," he said, leaning back. "I truly believe many people could learn something from it."

He looked out into the street for a moment, as though he still saw the stage before him.

"It says something about the conditions of art. Not only in the theatre, but in general. The world is full of rules, expectations, patrons, investors, critics, and institutions. Each pull at his own thread. Every artist begins as a marionette."

I nodded without interrupting.

Moreau continued, now with greater engagement.

"The decisive moment comes when the artist ceases to work for the expectations of others and begins to work from his own creative force. That is where the best works arise. Not when someone tells him what he must do, but when he finds his own voice."

He smiled.

"I believe all artists dream of that moment."

I let the smoke rise before me and listened.

Moreau was now speaking almost more about himself than about the play. I had by this time come to know him well enough to understand that his interest in art was not merely professional. He lived through it. For him, art was not a question of money or prestige. It was a question of freedom.

Outside, people drifted past in the electrically lit evening, while the streetcars continued their regular passage through the streets. Moreau still sat with his eyes turned toward the window, but I had the impression that his thoughts remained inside the theatre, among the fallen strings and the liberated marionettes.

I allowed the silence to last a moment before I said:

"Moreau, it seems to me that until now we have been searching for the strings."

He turned toward me with a questioning look.

"The strings?"

"Yes. We have all along assumed that the people we are investigating must be controlled. That every action must lead back to an order, an instruction, or a hidden hand which pulled them. But the more I think

about Miss Ardent's play, the more I doubt whether that is how we should understand it."

He regarded me attentively, without yet quite following the reasoning, and I therefore continued.

"Do you remember what she answered when I asked her what she herself found most interesting in the performance?"

Moreau reflected.

"That it was not the strings."

"Precisely. And when I pressed her a little further, she said something else. Something which seems to me far more important."

I slowly repeated the words:

"'Perhaps the secret lies in the fact that the actors have made the common purpose their own.'"

I noticed how the sentence affected him. At first he merely became silent. Then his gaze moved away from me and out toward the street, as though he were trying to see the thought before him. Slowly he began to nod.

"Yes," he said after a time. "Yes, of course. That is where the difference lies."

He leaned forward across the table, and now it was he who carried the thought further.

"We have been searching for the connections. For the direct orders. For the person who gave the message and the person who carried it out. But perhaps that is not how Ashcroft's world functions at all."

He was silent for a moment and let his gaze move over the other guests in the café.

"We have imagined a system of commands. But what if instead we are dealing with a system of people who act on their own?"

"Toward the same goal," I said.

"Exactly."

His voice grew more certain now.

"They act freely. They make their own decisions. They use their own initiative. But they are never in doubt as to which direction benefits Ashcroft."

I nodded. For the first time, the many invisible connections with which we had struggled since Paris seemed to form an intelligible pattern.

Moreau suddenly smiled.

"It is almost like art."

"Yes," I replied. "Or like an artist who has understood something fundamental about human beings: that the strongest forces seldom arise through control, but through freedom."

He laughed softly.

"So, we are dealing with an artist, then?"

I slowly exhaled the smoke.

"Not necessarily an artist. But a man who understands the same mechanisms. A man who knows that people create more when they feel free than when they are kept on strings."

Again, silence fell between us, but this time it was not empty. On the contrary, thought continued to work in both of us.

At last Moreau said:

"If that is true, then we have been searching for something which may not exist at all."

"Yes."

"Then what do we do now?"

"Miss Ardent was fascinated by the fact that they all remained," I said. "But reality is less orderly than the stage. There will always be people who use their freedom differently than expected."

Moreau's eyes lifted at once.

"The deviants."

"Precisely."

Now he too began to nod.

"So, they are the ones we must find."

"Yes. Not those who follow the system, but those who fall outside it. Those who, at some point, have chosen another direction."

I leaned back.

"A system such as Ashcroft's can endure mistakes. It can endure accidents. But it will always have difficulty enduring people who refuse to work toward the unspoken common goal."

"And if we find them," Moreau said quietly, "we may also find the system's weaknesses."

I looked out through the window toward the lights of New York.

"That is exactly my thought."

With Watson

I lay the letter aside and remain seated for a moment with my hands resting on the desk. The fire crackles softly in the hearth, and beyond the window the late afternoon lies over London with that muted calm which only English winters seem to possess. Across the room Holmes's old chair still stands in its place, and, as so often before, my gaze drifts there involuntarily while I allow my thoughts to follow the words I have just read.

When one follows a case through Holmes's own letters, certain connections often become clearer than they were to him at the time. So, it seems to me here. Through several of the letters from New York I had noticed how his attention had gradually slipped away from the concrete clues and toward the people themselves. On the surface, it might almost have looked like a departure from his usual method. He seemed less occupied with the document, less occupied with the auction, and even less occupied with the individual incidents which had otherwise driven the case forward.

Instead, he began to interest himself in persons, motives, and relationships. He observed Ashcroft long before he had any real evidence against him. He studied Camille Ardent without fully understanding her role. He returned again and again to Rosenfeld, the cardinal, and Moreau, as though there were something between them which had not yet found its proper form.

Now I understood why.

Without knowing it himself, Holmes had already moved away from the strings.

He had sensed that the explanations we normally seek in an investigation were no longer sufficient. There were, to be sure, connections between the people involved. There was money, there were interests,

alliances, and conflicts. But each time he tried to follow these lines to their end, they dissolved in his hands.

Only with Camille Ardent's curious play did he receive the image that had been missing.

It was not the strings that held the system together, but the common purpose.

Ashcroft's world did not prove to be built like a network of direct orders and obedient agents. It functioned rather as a culture, a shared way of thinking, an environment in which people did not need to receive instructions because they already knew which direction would benefit the man around whom the entire system had been constructed.

As I read this letter today, it seems to me that this was the true turning point in the whole New York affair.

Moreau had followed the money with great skill and greater persistence than most men would have been capable of. Yet in the end he had reached a blind alley, because he was still searching for connections that could be drawn on a map or followed through an account book.

Moran, for his part, had been so occupied with the document and the auction he himself had created that he scarcely understood the greater force moving around him.

Both of them saw the strings. Neither of them saw the stage.

Holmes had not yet seen the whole truth either. But his instinct had led him closer to it. He had sensed the pattern before he could explain it. As so often before, his intuition had been a few steps ahead of his own conscious understanding.

I must confess that, now that I have come this far in the letters, I feel a growing expectation. Holmes no longer seems merely to be following events. He is beginning to understand them.

And once Holmes understood his opponents, the outcome was seldom far away.

With this thought I take the next letter from the pile, glance at the date, carefully break the seal, and lean back in my chair as Holmes's familiar handwriting once again leads me back to New York.

The Seventh Letter

February 11, 1892
New York City

Samuel Pierce — Lawyer
The name means nothing to me. And yet it awakens my curiosity, for I have learned by now that Holmes seldom chose his headings by accident. When he named a letter after a person, it was usually because that person, in one way or another, came to play a part which reached far beyond the first impression.

I lean back in my chair and begin the next letter.

My dear Watson,

The following morning Moreau and I met once again. Since our conversation after the performance at The Manhattan Music Hall, we had both been occupied by the same thought. If we wished to understand Ashcroft's system, we had to find the people who were no longer part of it. We had to seek out those who, at some point, had ceased to play the piece according to the manuscript.

Moreau arrived with an unusual satisfaction which I had by now learned to recognise in him. He placed his folder on the table between us, ordered coffee, and began without much preamble to tell me of a name which, over several years, had appeared again and again during his investigations.

"Samuel Pierce," he said. "I came across him so often that at last I began to wonder why he had suddenly ceased to exist."

I asked him to continue.

Pierce had for a number of years been chief legal counsel to one of Nathaniel Ashcroft's most important companies. If Ashcroft was the architect behind the empire, Pierce had been one of the men who ensured that the structure could remain upright without collapsing under the weight of its own ambitions. In Moreau's estimation, he had been neither an idealist nor a criminal. On the contrary, he seemed to have possessed that particular form of legal talent which makes it possible to move along the outermost edge of the law without ever quite crossing it.

"He was an expert in exploiting the system," said Moreau. "Not in breaking the rules, but in finding the places where the rules ceased to be clear."

It was therefore all the more remarkable that, about five years earlier, he had disappeared from the circles in which his name had previously carried considerable weight. Moreau had long believed that he might be dead. Only later had he learned that this was not the case. Pierce was still alive, but apparently in an entirely different place and under very different circumstances.

From the folder Moreau drew out an address dating from the period when Pierce had still worked for Ashcroft. If the man had truly been among the first deviants, it seemed to me well worth beginning there.

Half an hour later we were driving through the financial center of Manhattan, where the great law firms stood side by side in solid buildings of stone and granite. Everything around us spoke of success, capital, and respectability, and it was precisely the sort of quarter in which one would expect to find a man of Samuel Pierce's former rank.

When we arrived, however, it quickly became clear that the name was no longer to be found on any door, plaque, or directory. The office had long since been taken over by others. After several fruitless inquiries, we nevertheless managed to find an elderly proprietor of a wine shop who thought he remembered him.

"Pierce?" he repeated thoughtfully. "Yes, that would be four or five years ago. He disappeared from here."

The man gestured toward the southeast, as though he could see several years back through the city streets.

"I believe he is still alive. But not here. Not any longer."

He named another district and described roughly where we might begin to look. Even as I listened, the picture began to form. If the information was correct, Pierce had moved from a world of wealthy clients and great companies into a far more modest environment.

We took another cab and let the city slide past outside. Gradually the surroundings changed in character. The broad facades gave way to smaller buildings, lesser businesses, and offices of the kind which lived from ordinary people's troubles. Here were accountants, real-estate agents, insurance brokers, and lawyers who assisted small tradesmen, craftsmen, and skippers with contracts, applications, and disputes.

When we stepped down at the corner the wine merchant had described, I was no longer in doubt that Samuel Pierce had suffered a considerable fall. The only question was why.

After one more brief inquiry, we were directed to a building on the opposite side of the street. A man pointed up toward the first floor and nodded, as though the name were still known among the residents of the neighbourhood.

Moreau and I crossed the street, passed through the narrow entrance, and began to climb the worn staircase. A few moments later we stood before an anonymous door with frosted glass. On the pane was written simply: **Samuel Pierce, Representation Before the Court.**

I knocked.

Some little time passed before there was movement inside the office. A chair was pushed back, papers rustled, and only then came the sound of a lock being drawn. The door opened slowly, and before them stood a man in his mid-fifties, thin-haired and slightly stooped, dressed in dark clothes of the sort which suggested neither poverty nor wealth, but rather the quiet respectability suited to an ordinary lawyer.

The first thing that struck Holmes was not the man's face, but the absence of everything that normally surrounded a successful attorney. There was no secretary, no clerk, no air of business. Only Samuel Pierce himself.

The man studied them for a moment, lowered his eyes toward the floor as though considering whether the visit was worth the trouble, and then stepped aside.

"Please come in."

They followed him inside.

The office was modest in every respect. Along the walls stood cabinets filled with files and documents, and behind a single desk there was only the necessary furniture. Yet there were traces of another past. Holmes's gaze lingered on several photographs on the wall. They showed large construction projects, newly built hotels, and official openings. In several of the pictures a younger Samuel Pierce stood among men with the confident bearing that comes with power and success. In one of the photographs Holmes even thought he recognised Nathaniel Ashcroft. Both men smiled at the camera with that particular optimism which marks those who still feel that the future belongs to them.

Pierce asked them to take the two chairs before the desk, after which he seated himself.

"How may I assist you, gentlemen?"

Moreau spoke first. With his usual caution, he explained that through his former work as an art dealer he had several times encountered Samuel Pierce's name in connection with various transactions and building projects. One larger cultural project in particular had caused the name to remain in his memory. Now that he was again in New York, he was investigating the possibility of new connections within the art world, and in that regard, he had become curious to hear a little more about the old days.

While he spoke, Pierce sat with his hands folded before him and let his gaze move between Moreau and Holmes. When Ashcroft's name was mentioned, a faint smile appeared on his face.

"Yes," he said quietly. "That was then."

He leaned back and let his gaze move toward the photographs on the wall.

"I fear I can no longer be of much help to you. As you surely know, things rise and fall in this world."

There was something almost ironic in his voice.

"At that time, I occupied a rather different position."

Holmes now chose to enter the conversation.

"You worked for Ashcroft."

Pierce nodded.

"For Ashcroft, yes."

For a moment he seemed to consider how much he wished to say.

"I did considerable work for him. One might perhaps even say that I helped clear the way for part of what later became his empire."

His gaze again rested on the photographs.

"They were interesting years."

He was silent for a moment.

"But the collaboration ended."

Moreau leaned slightly forward.

"There was no longer work?"

At this question Pierce gave a short laugh, though without amusement.

"On the contrary."

He slowly shook his head.

"There was more and more of it."

For the first time there was something weary in his voice.

"More work. More companies. More structures. More layers between the people who made the decisions and the people whose names appeared on the papers."

He unfolded his hands and looked at them for a moment.

"Companies were created at a pace even I found difficult to follow. Some existed only briefly. Others were registered under names no one could remember. A few were placed in the hands of persons who scarcely knew that they were directors."

He looked up at Holmes.

"I was a lawyer. It was my task to find solutions."

"Solutions?" asked Holmes.

Pierce smiled faintly.

"Yes. Both traditional and less traditional ones."

Holmes nodded without interrupting.

Slowly, the former lawyer continued.

"The work became more political. More complicated. And if I am entirely honest, it gradually became more difficult for me to look myself in the eye."

The room fell silent.

Outside one could hear the sound of carriages and people down in the street, but inside the office time seemed for a moment to stand still.

"It was the height of my career," he said at last, pointing toward the pictures on the wall. "Back then my office was in quite another quarter. I was invited to dinners, to meetings, and to projects of which most lawyers could only dream. I thought I had reached the goal toward which I had worked all my life."

His smile returned, but this time it was marked by a quiet sorrow.

"And for that very reason it took me so long to understand what I had become part of."

Moreau said nothing. Nor did Holmes. Both sensed that Samuel Pierce had as yet only opened the door a little way upon the story which had led him from the world of success and influence shown in the photographs to this modest office.

"When I began to ask questions," he continued, "and when I could no longer simply go with the current, things began to change. Not violently. Not from one day to the next. It happened so slowly that I almost failed to notice it."

He drew a deep breath.

"First the invitations ceased. Then the clients disappeared. Then the telephone stopped ringing. People who had formerly sought my advice suddenly found other advisers. Contracts went elsewhere. Doors which had always stood open were quietly and steadily closed."

He spread his hands.

"And before half a year had passed, I was, in practice, of no importance."

His gaze moved once more around the little office.

"Now I sit here."

He smiled again with the same sorrowful dignity Holmes had already noticed at the door.

"But at least I am alive. That is more than some others can say."

Moreau leaned a little forward in his chair and regarded the former lawyer with growing interest.

"Am I to understand that Ashcroft dismissed you?"

The question drew, for the first time, a direct laugh from Samuel Pierce. It was not a merry laugh, but rather that kind of self-mocking amusement which comes when a man recalls something that has long since lost its power to wound.

"No, no," he said, shaking his head. "Ashcroft never dismisses people."

Holmes cast a brief glance at Moreau.

"He evidently has others to do it for him."

"Not even that," Pierce replied, and his smile lingered for a moment. "That is precisely the interesting part."

He leaned back and folded his hands over his stomach while he searched for the proper words.

"You must understand that Nathaniel Ashcroft is an unusual man. If he were not, he would never have reached the position he holds today. He is charismatic, intelligent, and possessed of a rare ability to make people believe in the same things he believes in. After a time, his thoughts almost begin to live a life of their own among those around him. His plans are understood long before they are spoken. His wishes are perceived before he himself has formulated them."

Pierce looked from one visitor to the other.

"He dismisses no one. He threatens no one. He humiliates no one. On the contrary, he smiles, shakes hands, and speaks kindly to all. He simply prefers to associate with those who are rising."

For a moment he was silent.

"And then the rest happens by itself."

Holmes said nothing, but Pierce seemed to understand that they had grasped his meaning.

"When I began to lose his confidence, I was not removed. I merely became less interesting. And once that happens, one's surroundings

discover it with astonishing speed. Suddenly the invitations no longer arrive. Associates find other advisers. Opportunities seek new directions. No one tells you why. No one needs to tell you why."

He shrugged.

"It is almost elegant."

Moreau sat still for a moment.

"You mentioned earlier that others had not been quite as fortunate as you."

Pierce nodded slowly.

"Yes."

His gaze drifted toward the window.

"There are many."

When he spoke again, his voice had grown more serious.

"I witnessed part of it myself while I was still within Ashcroft's circle, and later I could not help noticing what happened to others."

"Can you be more specific?" Holmes asked.

A faint smile appeared once more.

"Perhaps. I can scarcely fall much lower than I already have."

He considered for a moment.

"If you truly wish to understand the system, you should speak with Senator Charles Whitmore. He was one of the few politicians who did not automatically clap his hands whenever Ashcroft presented his plans. At one time he was one of the city's most promising political figures. Today he is largely forgotten."

Pierce raised a finger.

"And then there is Patrick O'Donnell, formerly a police commissioner. An honourable man, in my opinion. He had the unfortunate habit of keeping his eyes open at the wrong times and closing them at the wrong ones."

Moreau noted down the names.

"Are there others?"

"Several."

Pierce hesitated.

"Thomas McKenna. Labor leader. He organised many of the workers on Ashcroft's building projects. A troublesome man, if one asked the investors, and a necessary man, if one asked the workers."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"And since you yourself mention the art world, you might also seek out Isabella Varga. Hungarian art dealer. An exceedingly capable woman."

When he had spoken the last name, silence fell in the office.

It seemed to Holmes that Samuel Pierce had lifted a burden from his shoulders, not because he had revealed great secrets, but because he had pointed toward the people who, together, might tell the story far better than he himself could.

He lowered his eyes to the desktop for a moment before looking up again at Holmes and Moreau.

"I cannot help you much more than this. My connections are long since gone. But it would please me if your inquiries brought you nearer the truth. Not necessarily justice."

He smiled faintly.

"I have grown old enough to know that the two things do not always go hand in hand."

His gaze moved briefly around the modest office.

"But perhaps only a little attention to what goes on — and still goes on — in the shadows."

With a sudden movement he rose.

"Yes, gentlemen. I believe that is what I could contribute today."

Holmes and Moreau rose as well.

"If you should need me again," Pierce continued with a crooked smile, "I am still to be found at this address. And as you have no doubt observed, I do not suffer from excessive busyness."

They exchanged handshakes, thanked him for his time, and allowed him to show them to the door.

Only when they once more stood upon the pavement and heard the noise of the city around them did either of them speak.

Holmes turned for a moment and looked up toward the first-floor window.

"He was not the first dissenter," he said quietly.

"No," Moreau replied.

"But he may be the first to show us the way to the others."

And with the names of their new leads in their pockets, they continued down the street toward New York's clamorous multitude, while the afternoon sun cast long shadows between the buildings.

My dear Watson,

The visit to Pierce had opened new possibilities, not merely because he had given us names, but because he had given us a direction. For the first time it was clear that there were other people who had once been part of Ashcroft's circle, but who, for one reason or another, had slipped out of it. Other dissenters, if you will. Men and women who might be able to tell us more about the system than any of those who still remained within it.

Nevertheless, that same evening I decided once more to seek out The Manhattan Music Hall.

Fellowship Was Preserved

I wished to see Camille Ardent on the stage again and to experience the remarkable performance which she and her fellow actors had presented a few days earlier. Perhaps there were details in the piece which I had not yet understood. It is an experience I have had several times in life, that one seldom sees a work clearly the first time. Whether it is a play, a book, or merely a conversation one later recalls, new shades reveal themselves upon a second viewing. What first seemed insignificant may later prove central, while the obvious often loses something of its force. Such was my feeling about Camille's play.

When I arrived, I chose my usual seat. By then I had no particular need to conceal myself. Moran knew me. I knew him. Our relationship had assumed an almost curious character, in which both parties were aware of the other's presence without that awareness bringing the game to a halt.

I did not see him at the beginning of the performance, nor did he appear during the first act. In return, I experienced the play in quite another manner than I had the first time. Where my thoughts had previously been occupied by its connections to the case in which we were engaged, I now allowed myself, to a greater extent, to regard the work as art.

I noticed how each of the actors changed the moment his strings were cut. Not merely their movements, but their whole being seemed to awaken. There arose an energy which no instruction could have produced. It reminded me of something I had often observed in human beings: when a person is given the opportunity to act from conviction rather than from duty or compulsion, forces are released which otherwise remain hidden. There are few things more remarkable.

But the play contained another truth as well, one to which I may not have given sufficient weight the first time. For at the same moment that freedom was granted, the fellowship was preserved. None of the actors left the stage. None turned his back upon the others. On the contrary, their cooperation seemed to grow stronger. The fellowship gave their freedom direction, just as the freedom gave the fellowship life. I began to understand why Camille had found precisely this aspect so interesting.

When the curtain fell, I felt, in a curious fashion, both entertained and enlightened. I did not succeed in obtaining an opportunity to speak with Camille after the performance. She was surrounded by admirers, journalists, and acquaintances, and I had no particular desire to force my way forward. I therefore remained seated for a while longer with my coffee and then took a cab home.

The Eighth Letter

February 14, 1892
New York City

Senator Charles Whitmore

I noticed that Holmes had given the letter an unusually simple heading: Senator Charles Whitmore. Not The Affair of the Senator or The Fallen Politician, as he might at times have written with a glint of humour, but merely the man's name. Experience had taught me that when Holmes chose so sober a title, it was often because the person himself was more important than the event surrounding him.

I straightened the pile of letters before me and read on.

My dear Watson,

Of the two of us, it was undoubtedly Moreau who possessed the better connections in New York. Over several years he had built up a network which extended far beyond the art world, and I was gradually forced to admit that his knowledge of the city's many lines of connection was considerably greater than I had first supposed. Where I sought patterns, he sought people, and very often the two paths led to the same place.

It was therefore not difficult for him to uncover information about the former senator Charles Whitmore.

Early one of the following mornings, he collected me from the boardinghouse in a cab, and together we made our way through Manhattan toward the Hudson River. The city was already awake. Streetcars rumbled through the streets; workers streamed toward the day's tasks and everywhere sounded that peculiar mixture of noise and energy which

seemed to rise from New York itself. We crossed the river by ferry and then continued on the Brooklyn side, where another carriage carried us north through districts which gradually became less crowded and more industrial.

Moreau had the address, but not much more than that. When we at last approached our destination, I was therefore surprised by the sight that met us. On the shore of a small inlet stood an old sawmill, its machinery plainly having been silent for several years. The weather-beaten buildings still bore traces of former activity, but the silence around them told its own story. Beside the mill stood an American wooden villa, modest in size but well kept, and possessing a certain dignity, as though it refused to be dragged down into the decay of its surroundings.

We asked the driver to wait a moment while we attempted to make contact. Several knocks at the door produced no result. After a brief glance between Moreau and myself, we decided to go around the back of the house. If the owner was at home, we might perhaps find him in the garden or by one of the open windows.

It soon became clear that our efforts had been unnecessary.

Behind the house sat a man with an axe beside him and a pile of firewood before him. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and older than I had imagined, but his posture still revealed something of the authority which must once have made him a figure of consequence. He gave us only a brief glance, as though he already knew why strangers had come to seek him out, and then, without further ceremony, offered us a beer.

Moreau signalled to the driver that he might go on, and shortly afterward we followed our host into the house.

It was a home which told more about its owner than any conversation could have done. The sitting room bore clear traces of a former family life. Photographs still stood upon dressers and shelves, a few pieces of embroidery hung upon the walls, and several items of furniture had that character of careful selection which is so often due to a woman's hand. At the same time, signs of several years' solitude lay everywhere. Books stood open upon tables and windowsills, as though the reading had been interrupted and never resumed. Newspapers lay in small piles. Dust had

been permitted to gather in places where no one any longer had reason to remove it.

Whitmore asked us to sit down and placed three beers upon the table before us. He regarded us for a moment with an expectant expression.

"You are journalists?" he asked.

Moreau shook his head.

"No, far from it. Our interest is rather in art."

The former senator raised an eyebrow.

"Art?"

"Precisely. That interest has led us to several of the newer institutions in the city, among them the museum which Nathaniel Ashcroft has recently expanded."

The reaction came at once.

Whitmore leaned back and slowly shook his head.

"That scoundrel."

The words did not fall with anger, but with that particular weariness which men feel toward opponents they have fought for far too long.

"If only he could content himself with buildings," he continued. "But now, it seems, he must own art as well."

He was silent for a moment, as though memories were gathering about him, and then pushed his beer a little aside.

"I had better begin at the beginning," he said. "Otherwise, the story will make no sense."

His gaze moved briefly toward the window and beyond it to the silent sawmill.

"I did not begin as a politician. I began here."

He pointed toward the buildings.

"My family owned the mill. It was not a large enterprise, but it was enough to provide work for many people. I knew the workers by name. I knew their wives and children. And as the years passed, it became more and more apparent to me that the decisions shaping their lives were being made by men who had never set foot in a place like this."

A faint smile crossed his face.

"That was how I entered politics. Not for power. Nor for fame. But because I believed that ordinary people deserved a voice at the table."

He lifted the bottle and looked at it for a moment before continuing.

"And for a few years, I actually believed it was possible."

"But politics is a dirty game, you must understand," Whitmore continued after a longer silence, his eyes resting on the half-empty beer bottle before him. "People speak of ideals and principles, but most of it is compromise, alliances, and knowing the right men. No politician stands alone. One depends upon support, upon connections, and not least upon those men who have enough money to make things happen."

He smiled without pleasure.

"And that was where Nathaniel Ashcroft entered the picture."

"Ashcroft?" Moreau asked.

"Yes, Ashcroft." Whitmore nodded slowly. "At that time he was still on his way up, but even then it was clear that he was something out of the ordinary. Everything seemed to succeed for him. New buildings rose all over the city. Hotels, offices, warehouses. Each time anyone thought he had reached his limit, he found a new opportunity."

"And yet problems arose?" Moreau asked.

"Naturally. They always do. Permits. Labor disputes. Customs questions. Lawsuits. That sort of thing."

Holmes had listened silently until then.

"Was it Ashcroft himself who attempted to influence these matters?"

Whitmore shook his head at once.

"No. That was precisely the remarkable thing. He was far too clever for that. Even then he had built something much larger than an ordinary business. I would almost call it a movement."

He leaned back in his chair and let his gaze drift toward the window, as though he could still see those years before him.

"Everywhere there were people who, in one way or another, depended upon him. Lawyers, contractors, bankers, journalists, officials. People whose careers grew as his did. When he succeeded, they succeeded. When his projects advanced, their lives advanced with them."

His voice grew more serious.

"The curious thing was that he seldom had to ask them for anything. They already knew. They understood instinctively what would benefit him and acted accordingly. The way was cleared before him again and again. Not because he himself stood with a whip, but because so many people had an interest in seeing him move forward."

I noticed that Holmes exchanged a quick glance with Moreau. No doubt both were thinking of Camille's marionette performance.

"And you tried to stop him?" Holmes asked.

Whitmore shrugged.

"I tried, at least, to ask questions. Not because I hated the man. In fact, I admired him in many ways. But the more I saw, the harder it became to ignore how rules were bent, how laws were suddenly interpreted in new ways, and how exceptions arose precisely where they were needed."

He paused.

"In several cases I even succeeded in delaying his projects. A few times I had them stopped altogether. That was when I truly became a problem."

"And that was when you lost your position?" Moreau asked.

A bitter smile appeared on the former senator's face.

"Not at once. It happened gradually. First some of the contributors disappeared. Then the support became less visible. The newspapers began to take an interest in curious stories about me. People who had formerly sought my company suddenly found other places to be. In the end I stood almost alone, without entirely understanding when it had happened."

His gaze moved around the room.

"Then my wife left. The children followed her. I do not blame them. They grew tired of the struggle long before I did."

A heavy silence settled over the room.

"And now I sit here," Whitmore said at last. "I seldom go into the city anymore. I do not care to see what it has become. Not only because of Ashcroft. There are others like him. But he is the most skilful of them. The man who understood the system better than anyone else."

Moreau leaned forward.

"Is there evidence against him?"

For the first time since the conversation began, Whitmore did not hesitate.

"Yes," he said calmly. "There is."

The answer came with such certainty that even Holmes raised his eyes.

"Where?"

"In archives. In contracts. In old case files. In documents no one any longer wishes to look at. There are people who know the truth. The problem is not the lack of evidence. The problem is the lack of people who dare to bring it forward."

He looked directly at us.

"For everyone knows what happens to those who do."

His hand made a small circle around the modest room.

"I am not a victim. I am an example. A living warning sign to anyone who might get the idea of going against the current."

A brief silence followed Whitmore's last words. Outside, the wind moved through the empty buildings by the sawmill, and somewhere in the distance sounded the monotonous ring of metal against wood. The former senator sat with the bottle between his hands and stared at a point on the table before him, as though he were once more reliving the many years that had brought him from the political center of the city to this quiet existence by the river.

It was Holmes who broke the silence.

"One last question, Senator."

Whitmore raised his eyes.

"Of course."

"Has Ashcroft a weakness?"

The question seemed to surprise him more than anything that had gone before. He leaned back and let his gaze wander toward the window, and for some time he said nothing.

"I have thought a great deal about that," he answered at last. "Perhaps more than is healthy for a man."

A faint smile appeared upon his lips.

"When one has lost as much as I did, one inevitably begins to go over the past again and again. One looks for the moment when things might

have developed differently, and one asks oneself whether the opponent was truly as invincible as he appeared."

He was silent for a moment.

"At first glance it might seem so. I have seen many powerful men over the years, but few with his ability to gather people around him. He rarely made mistakes. He rarely said too much. He allowed others to perform the work which might have brought him into difficulty."

His gaze returned to us.

"But if you ask me for a weakness, I have nevertheless arrived at an answer."

Holmes sat quite still.

"What is it?"

Whitmore drew a slow breath.

"He does not tolerate opposition."

The words hung between us.

"That may sound banal," he continued, "but I have had ample opportunity to study him. He surrounds himself with people who admire him. His boards are full of men who owe him their positions. His advisers are intelligent, but they do not contradict him. Even among those closest to him, there seems to exist a strange agreement that he is always right."

A thoughtful expression passed across his face.

"The more I think of it, the more convinced I become that he rarely encounters real resistance. Not the sort of resistance in which a man refuses to bend. Not the sort which cannot be bought, persuaded, or isolated."

"And what would happen if he did?" asked Moreau.

Whitmore smiled wearily.

"That I do not know."

He shook his head slowly.

"But I do not believe he would handle it well. Men like him grow accustomed to the world moving in the direction they desire. When it does not, they often reveal sides of themselves which no one has seen before."

His gaze moved around the quiet sitting room.

"That, of course, is only my own thought. I never succeeded in bringing him into such a position. As you can see, I sit here, and he still owns half of New York."

There was no longer either bitterness or anger in his voice, only a tired statement of fact.

Shortly afterward we rose. Whitmore accompanied us to the door, and we thanked him for his hospitality. He wished us luck with our investigations, but in a manner which suggested that he no longer expected justice to have any particular interest in the world.

The journey back toward the city passed at first in silence. The cab rolled steadily along the smaller roads, while the afternoon sun hung low over the river and cast long shadows across the landscape. Behind us, Whitmore's lonely house gradually disappeared among the trees, and before us waited once more the dense streets and unceasing clamour of New York.

I was in no hurry to break the silence. Whitmore's last remark had lodged itself firmly in my mind.

At last, it was Moreau who spoke.

"It is an interesting thought," he said reflectively. "That perhaps he has never met real opposition."

He sat with his gaze fixed out of the window, while he seemed to review several years of investigations in his own mind.

"When I think back on the trails I have followed, there may indeed be something in it. Naturally Ashcroft has suffered setbacks. No enterprise grows to that size without difficulties along the way. There have been lost lawsuits, delays, and projects which did not develop as planned. But when I consider the people around him..." He hesitated for a moment. "Yes, then the picture is different. I cannot think of anyone from his inner circle who has seriously contradicted him."

Holmes sat silent beside him, his eyes fixed upon the passing houses.

"No," he said at last. "Nor does it seem likely to me."

Moreau nodded slowly.

"That may be why Whitmore fell so hard. He was not merely trying to delay a project. He contradicted the movement itself."

I noticed that Holmes' expression altered slightly at that word.

"The movement," he repeated.

Then he fell silent again.

For a while, nothing was heard but the rhythmic beat of the wheels upon the road.

"But perhaps," he said at last, "we may receive help from a quite unexpected quarter."

Moreau turned toward him.

"From whom?"

The corners of Holmes' mouth moved almost imperceptibly.

"Moran."

The name seemed for a moment to surprise the French art dealer.

"Moran?"

"Yes."

Holmes folded his hands before him.

"When I consider it, he may possibly be the first man in many years who has permitted himself to treat Ashcroft without respect."

Moreau sat silent for a moment and let the thought sink in.

"You mean because of the document?"

"Naturally because of the document."

Holmes looked out through the window.

"To Moran, the document is not merely a commodity. It is a trophy. A game. He does not merely wish to sell it. He wishes to control the situation. He wishes to determine the pace. He wishes for an audience."

A faint smile passed across his face.

"And such men find it difficult to forgo drama."

Moreau began slowly to nod.

"I believe I understand."

"Yes," continued Holmes. "If Whitmore is right, and if Ashcroft is truly accustomed to the world bending itself to his wishes, then Moran is precisely the sort of man who will irritate him."

"Because he refuses to bend."

"Precisely."

The cab turned onto a broader road. In the distance we could already discern the growing silhouette of the city.

Moreau leaned back.

"He may already have done so."

"I believe so too."

Holmes slowly lit his pipe.

"Rosenfeld has been threatened. The cardinal has disappeared. The entire auction seems to be pressed in one particular direction. Ashcroft is making it quite clear that he does not like the manner in which the document is being handled."

"That is not how one does business with him," said Moreau.

"No."

Holmes let the smoke rise before him.

"But Moran is not a man who allows himself to be directed. If he can obtain a greater profit by continuing the game, he will continue it. If he can make the hunt more dramatic, he will do so. If he can make a powerful opponent lose his composure, he will probably enjoy it."

Moreau smiled.

"So perhaps he is helping us without knowing it."

"That is precisely my thought."

Holmes regarded the smoke for a moment.

"Perhaps he has already helped us more than he suspects."

Another pause fell between us. The river came into view before the carriage, and shortly afterward we approached the ferry landing.

Moreau glanced at Holmes.

"So, what do we do?"

Holmes slowly removed the pipe from his mouth.

"Perhaps," he said, "we might help him a little."

He explained no more.

But by now I knew my friend well enough to understand that a new idea had found its place in his mind. Whether it was right or wrong, no one could yet know. But for the first time since our meeting with Whitmore, the pieces seemed to be moving in a direction which neither Ashcroft nor Moran had necessarily foreseen.

Shortly afterward we continued across the river toward Manhattan, while the city rose before us once more in the falling evening light.

The Ninth Letter

February 16, 1892
New York City

I find myself once more seated in my study, holding another of Holmes's letters in my hands. The fire crackles softly in the grate, while beyond the window London's winter sky hangs heavy and grey above the rooftops. There are moments during my reading of these old letters when I almost forget the many years that have passed and feel once again like the younger man who followed Holmes through the streets and mysteries of London. At other times, the distance between then and now becomes very clear indeed.

This particular letter immediately captures my attention.

Its heading reads simply:

Isabella Varga
My dear Watson,

The following morning Moreau suggested that we pay yet another of those visits which had gradually become a regular part of our investigations. Over the preceding years he had built a remarkable network within New York's art world, and although I still regarded him as more art dealer than investigator, I was obliged to admit that his connections frequently proved more valuable than most police reports.

"There is someone you ought to meet," he said as we sat at our usual table in the café. "An old acquaintance. Isabella Varga."

The name was not unfamiliar to me.

I immediately recalled that Samuel Pierce had mentioned her among those individuals who had, in one way or another, been part of Ashcroft's growing empire before later being pushed beyond its circle.

"An art dealer?" I asked.

"Both an art dealer and an artist," replied Moreau. "And far more interesting than most people in either profession."

Shortly afterward we left the café and proceeded on foot through the city.

By then New York had shown me many faces. I had walked among the labourers and sailors of the harbour, among the financiers in their towering office buildings, among the priests of the cathedral, and among collectors in their dusty libraries. That morning, however, led us into yet another world.

The neighbourhood changed character almost imperceptibly around us. The large commercial buildings gradually gave way to smaller houses. The streets seemed less formal. Workshops stood with their doors open onto the sidewalks. Through the windows one could see painters, sculptors, and craftsmen bent over their work. Colours, canvases, wood, stone, and metal appeared to flow together into one vast living organism.

There was a distinctive energy about the place. Not the frantic energy which drove the financial world forward, but another form of restless creativity.

At length Moreau stopped before a modest gallery and pointed toward the display window.

"Typical Isabella," he said with a faint smile.

At the center of the exhibition stood a bust carved from dark stone. The face was stern, almost melancholy, yet marked by a pride that lent the figure a peculiar dignity.

"Hungarian?" I asked.

"Very Hungarian," he replied.

We stepped inside. The bell above the door gave a muted ring, and after a moment a woman emerged from a room at the rear. She wore working clothes, and her hands were covered with dust from stone and clay. At

first, she regarded us with a certain professional politeness, but when she recognised Moreau, her face brightened immediately.

"Jean!"

She came forward with both hands outstretched.

"The old Europeans always find one another again," she said.

"It is the only way to survive America," replied Moreau.

She laughed heartily.

Their conversation quickly revealed that they had known one another for several years and had met repeatedly in Paris long before Isabella had settled in New York.

We seated ourselves at a small table among sculptures and paintings.

Isabella's Story

The conversation began with old acquaintances and travels, but gradually turned, quite naturally, toward the subject that had brought us there. When Moreau mentioned Ashcroft's name, the smile vanished almost imperceptibly from her face.

"Yes," she said slowly. "That is a large chapter."

For a moment she looked down at her hands.

"And not a chapter I remember with unmixed pleasure."

Then she began her account.

At first everything had appeared promising. Several of her works had been purchased for hotels, cultural centres, and prestigious public buildings. She had later been engaged as an adviser on artistic acquisitions and had suddenly gained access to projects on a scale she had never previously imagined.

"There were almost no limits," she said. "If someone wanted a work of art, it was purchased. If someone wanted a collection, it was found. If something was located in Europe, it was transported here."

She smiled briefly.

"To an art dealer it feels almost like a fairy tale."

But the fairy tale had not lasted.

At a certain point she had been asked to certify the provenance of a number of works.

"They were copies," she said calmly.

"You knew that?"

"I had no doubt."

She gave a slight shrug.

"Not poor copies. On the contrary. But copies nonetheless."

She had refused to sign. Shortly afterward another matter had arisen. Then another. Each time she had declined.

"I believed it was a matter of professional disagreement," she said. "I was mistaken."

She leaned back.

"It began quietly. The commissions ceased. My own works suddenly became less interesting. Some of the pieces I had lent to prospective buyers were returned damaged. Others disappeared. Eventually it became obvious that I was no longer welcome."

I then asked whether she believed Ashcroft himself had been personally responsible for the treatment she had received. To my surprise she rejected the idea almost immediately. She shook her head before the question had scarcely been completed, and a faint, almost apologetic smile crossed her face.

"No," she said. "That would actually surprise me."

She fell silent for a moment, as though searching for the fairest way to describe him.

"I met him on several occasions. At openings, receptions, and other events where art was displayed for investors or guests. He was always courteous. He seemed genuinely interested—not merely in art as decoration, but in the stories and ideas behind the works themselves. If you asked me to describe him, I should sooner call him cultivated than brutal."

She gave a slight shrug.

"At the same time, however, he was surrounded by so many people that I often doubted whether he even knew who I was. Advisers, administrators, directors, art consultants, and intermediaries were everywhere around him. I was merely one among many."

That particular remark remained fixed in my memory. In a curious way it accorded perfectly with the picture that was gradually taking shape around Nathaniel Ashcroft. Time and again we had encountered people who had been pushed aside, forced out, or otherwise harmed by forces apparently working in his favour. Yet no one had thus far been able to point to a specific order, a direct demand, or an action that could indisputably be traced back to the man himself. It was as though the entire system surrounding him reacted of its own accord, long before his wishes ever needed to be spoken aloud.

The Kessler Siblings

The conversation then drifted toward New York's art world, and as Isabella had for many years moved freely among collectors, galleries, and art dealers, it seemed only natural for me to inquire about her knowledge of the individuals who formed the city's cultural circles.

She laughed softly at the question.

"If I did not know them after all these years, I should have wasted my time rather thoroughly."

There was warmth in her voice, but also a certain weariness.

"The art world often struck me as resembling politics far more than its participants cared to admit. Alliances were formed and dissolved. Fortunes were made and ruined. And behind the public devotion to beauty and culture there were often ambitions every bit as powerful as those one finds in stock exchanges or parliaments."

I allowed the conversation to rest for a moment before mentioning the rumours that were by then already circulating through several circles of the city. Rumours concerning an object of extraordinary significance. A document. A historical document of ecclesiastical importance and of a value that could scarcely be measured in money alone.

Isabella did not answer at once.

She remained seated with her gaze fixed upon one of the sculptures in the room, as though the question had awakened a memory.

"I have heard nothing definite," she said at last. "But there have been hints. Not about the document itself. More that certain people are searching for something new. Something greater than usual."

Moreau immediately leaned forward.

"Which people?"

"A brother and sister," she replied. "Elias and Rebecca Kessler."

Even before she continued, I could see from Moreau's expression that the name was not unfamiliar to him.

"They are among the wealthiest art dealers and collectors in the entire country," she continued. "Perhaps the wealthiest. Whenever museums attempt to acquire something, the Kessler siblings are often trying to purchase the same object. Whenever a private collection comes onto the market, they are almost always among the interested parties."

This naturally led me to another man who had already appeared several times during our investigations.

"And Rosenfeld?" I asked. "Do you know him as well?"

The smile returned immediately.

"Mr. Rosenfeld? Everyone knows him."

There was genuine respect in her voice.

"He is among the finest restorers I have ever met. Many collectors possess greater fortunes. Several have larger collections. But very few possess his professional skill. If a manuscript or an ancient document must be saved, he is one of the first men who comes to mind."

She shook her head slightly.

"But financially he cannot begin to compete with the Kessler siblings. If there truly exists a document of the magnitude you suggest, Rosenfeld will be able to compete only through his knowledge, not through his money."

She fell silent for a moment before adding:

"And perhaps that is precisely why he is important. Money impresses many people. But there are collectors who fear a man of knowledge far more than a man of wealth."

That remark remained with me long after we had left her gallery. For the first time I began to suspect that the struggle for the document might

not depend solely upon who could afford to purchase it, but also upon who best understood its significance. And in such contests, knowledge can at times prove far more valuable than even the greatest fortune.

Moreau thanked Isabella for her information and, not least, for the hospitality with which she had received us. She modestly dismissed any thanks and assured us that the pleasure had been entirely her own. There was something sincere in the manner in which she said it, and as she accompanied us toward the door through the quiet rooms of the gallery, she added that she would always be at our disposal should our investigations once again lead us into New York's art world.

Outside, the afternoon had already begun to drift toward evening. The light fell obliquely between the buildings, and the workshops and galleries of the district still hummed with activity. We walked for some distance in silence before Moreau stopped at a street corner and turned toward me.

"I believe," he said thoughtfully, "that the time has come for us to separate for a few days."

He stood with his hands in the pockets of his coat, watching the flow of people around us.

"The Kessler siblings interest me. If they have truly become aware of the document, they are too important to ignore. I can begin by gathering information about them and afterward determine whether a visit would be worthwhile."

He smiled faintly.

"In that respect I possess an advantage, after all. I need not disguise myself or invent any story. I can simply be who I am. An art dealer from Paris is unlikely to arouse suspicion in their circles."

I nodded.

"That seems entirely sensible to me."

There was, however, one piece of information which I had not yet shared with him.

"There is perhaps something you ought to know first."

Moreau raised his eyebrows in inquiry.

"A few evenings ago," I continued, "I saw Moran in the company of a gentleman and a lady at the Manhattan Music Hall. They did not appear to be a married couple. Rather, they seemed like two people working together. I noticed a certain similarity in their manner. If the Kessler siblings are as prominent as Isabella suggests, it is not impossible that it was they."

Moreau remained standing for a moment without replying.

"That is interesting," he said at last.

"Very interesting."

He already seemed to be working through the implications.

"If Moran has already established contact, it means that the document remains very much in play. It may also explain why he appears so unconcerned about the developments involving Rosenfeld and the Cardinal."

I could not disagree.

Several of the recent events had, at first glance, appeared to count against him, and yet he had retained the same relaxed confidence that had characterised him ever since the voyage.

Moreau nodded slowly to himself.

"Then I shall begin there."

He extended his hand.

"Let us meet again in a few days."

We exchanged a firm handshake and then parted upon the sidewalk, while the crowd immediately closed around us.

For my own part, the separation was most welcome. Not because I underestimated the value of Moreau's company—quite the contrary—but because our recent conversations had left me with a growing need to collect my own thoughts. The people we had met during the preceding weeks returned again and again to my mind. Samuel Pierce. Charles Whitmore. Isabella Varga. Men and women from vastly different backgrounds who seemed to share only one thing in common: at some point they had been part of the circle surrounding Nathaniel Ashcroft, and afterward they had drifted out of it—or perhaps, more accurately, been pushed out.

Until now we had regarded them as isolated witnesses, as individuals each capable of contributing a piece of the puzzle. But after my conversation with Camille Ardent, and the reflections inspired by her remarkable theatrical production, I began to suspect that they were something more than that. They were not merely people who had suffered defeat. They were deviants from the pattern—individuals who, at some point, had ceased moving in the same direction as the organisation surrounding Ashcroft.

It was precisely for that reason that I wished to study them more closely. Not their grievances or their losses, but the moment at which they had begun to move against the current. For if we had truly understood the system correctly, the answer must be found there. Not among those who continued to serve Ashcroft loyally, but among those who, for one reason or another, had chosen a different path.

And with that thought I continued alone through the streets of New York while the noise of the city surged around me like the sound of the sea around a ship. A new trail was beginning to take shape, and for the first time since my arrival in America I felt that we might be approaching the heart of the mystery that had thus far concealed itself behind the document, the money, and all the visible events. It was no longer merely a question of what Ashcroft did. It was becoming a question of how his world functioned. And that seemed to me more interesting than any document I had yet seen.

The Tenth Letter

February 19, 1892
New York City

A day passed without my hearing from Moreau.

When the following day also went by without the smallest communication from him, I began to suppose that his inquiries had carried him deeper into the circle of the Kessler siblings than he had originally expected. By then I knew the man well enough to understand that, once a trail had caught his interest, he threw himself upon it with an energy that reminded me of the best investigators I had ever known.

The Sight of Moran

As evening approached, I therefore resolved once more to visit the Manhattan Music Hall. I did not know whether Camille Ardent's remarkable marionette play was still on the program. If it was, I wished to see it again, not because I expected to discover any new clue, but because the piece continued to occupy my thoughts. If, on the other hand, it had been replaced by something else, I might still be fortunate enough to encounter Camille herself.

The hall proved to be as full as usual, though the evening's entertainment was different. The music was lighter, the audience noisier, and Camille was nowhere to be seen. I took my usual seat and allowed my gaze to move slowly through the room.

It was not long before I caught sight of Moran. He was seated at a table near the bar, in conversation with several people whom I did not know. At that distance it was impossible to hear what was being said, but I could not help noticing a difference in his manner. Where he had previously seemed almost ostentatiously self-assured, he appeared this evening more thoughtful. He listened more than he spoke and seemed engaged in the conversation in a way I had rarely observed in him. Several times I tried to read the situation, but without much success. Perhaps they were potential buyers. Perhaps they were merely acquaintances. At last, I abandoned the attempt and turned my attention to my pipe.

As the smoke rose slowly through the glow of the electric lamps, my thoughts returned to Moreau. His assistance had been invaluable, and I was forced to admit that at our first meeting I had greatly underestimated him. I had expected a capable art dealer with useful connections. Instead, I had found a man with an almost investigative instinct, a profound knowledge of the European art world, and a remarkable ability to follow traces through banks, collectors, and auction rooms alike.

I was still absorbed in these reflections, while the smoke from my pipe drifted upward toward the ceiling and mingled with the general haze of tobacco that always hung above the room. The music continued upon the stage, guests came and went between the tables, and the familiar murmur of voices, glasses, and laughter formed the background that had by now become well known to me. It was for that very reason that it took me a moment to become aware of the curious sensation of being watched.

When I raised my eyes, they fell almost immediately upon Moran. He was still seated at his table near the bar, but his attention was no longer fixed upon the people with whom he had been speaking. Instead, his gaze rested upon me. The distance between us was considerable, and under other circumstances I should have been cautious about drawing a hasty conclusion, but this time I had no doubt. He had seen me.

There was no visible reaction. No gesture. No greeting. He merely looked at me for a brief moment before turning back to his companions. Yet I was left with the distinct impression that something had changed.

A few minutes later, that impression was confirmed. Moran rose calmly, like a man who had concluded an entirely ordinary conversation. He took up his coat, exchanged a few final remarks with the company, and then moved toward the exit without appearing in the least hurried. Had I not already noticed his glance, I should scarcely have found anything remarkable in his behaviour.

I hesitated only for a very short time. There was no real plan behind my decision. Rather, it was one of those instinctive reactions which often comes to an investigator when experience tells him that a moment must not be allowed to pass unused. I placed some coins upon the table, rose, and followed him.

Outside, the air was noticeably cooler than within the variety hall. The electric lamps cast their yellowish light across the pavements, while streetcars and cabs continued to move through the city with that tireless energy which seemed to characterise New York at every hour of the day and night. Moran turned to the right, and I followed at a suitable distance. He did not appear to be in any particular haste. On the contrary, he moved with the same calm assurance that had characterised him since I had first encountered him in Paris. Several times he vanished briefly behind groups of people or passing vehicles, but each time I recovered sight of him.

As we moved farther away from the liveliest streets, the surroundings grew quieter. There were fewer shops, less light, and emptier pavements. At last, he turned into a narrow side street. I followed a few seconds later, but the moment I rounded the corner, I felt the first stirrings of unease. The street lay almost empty. Moran was gone.

I stopped and let my gaze move back and forth between the rows of houses. The distance had been too short for him to have disappeared far away, and at the same time there were no obvious gates or entrances into which he might have slipped. Slowly I moved forward. Just as I reached an old tree by the edge of the pavement, a figure stepped out of the darkness a few paces in front of me.

It was Moran. I shall not conceal from you, Watson, that my surprise was complete.

He had not merely discovered that I was following him. He had deliberately led me to a place where, for a brief interval, the roles had been reversed, and where it was no longer I who observed him, but he who observed me. He stood quite still and regarded me. There was nothing of the social charm about him which he sometimes displayed at the card table or in the better salons. His face was calm, almost expressionless, but behind that outward composure I sensed the same watchfulness that must have made him a dangerous hunter in the Indian provinces.

An Unexpected Encounter

For a moment neither of us spoke. The darkness between the houses seemed suddenly closer, and the distant sounds of the city reached the narrow street only faintly. I was struck by how natural Moran appeared in such surroundings, as though the lights of civilisation and the crowds of men had been no more than scenery, while this—the silence, the uncertainty, and the confrontation between two adversaries—was the environment in which he felt most at home.

"If you are attempting to place obstacles in my path, Mr. Sigurdsson," he said calmly, "then you should know that I am not a man who hesitates for long. I do what is necessary."

He paused briefly.

"Do you understand?"

His voice was neither loud nor overtly threatening, and for that very reason the words carried greater force. Through the years I had encountered many men who sought to conceal their uncertainty behind grand gestures or loud declarations. Moran did not belong to that category. He delivered a threat as a mathematician might state a result.

"What precisely do you mean?" I asked.

He let his eyes rest upon me for several seconds, as though considering how much he wished to say.

"First Rosenfeld," he said.

His eyes did not leave mine.

"Then the Cardinal."

Another brief pause followed.

"And now your French friend, who pays a visit to the Kessler siblings."

He slowly shook his head.

"Three buyers, Mr. Sigurdsson. Three people with an interest in my merchandise. One is attacked. Another disappears. The third is suddenly visited by persons who have, by coincidence, followed me from Paris to New York."

He drew a deep breath.

"What do you suppose I am to think?"

I could not help observing that he did not sound angry. On the contrary, he sounded like a man attempting to solve an equation in which the numbers no longer fitted. It seemed to me then that Moran was in precisely the same position as ourselves. He lacked an explanation, and it was that very fact which made him dangerous.

"You are right in one respect," I answered after a moment's consideration. "The coincidence is striking."

A faint smile passed over his face.

"I am glad that we can at least agree upon that."

"But I visited Rosenfeld only after the fire. The Cardinal's disappearance surprised me as much as it did you. And as for the Kessler siblings..." I gave a slight shrug. "I can only say that they seem to me a natural part of the picture."

"Natural?"

"Yes."

I regarded him for a moment.

"If I wished to sell a document of the value you claim this one possesses, I should also be interested in people with the necessary means."

For the first time that evening, I saw something like genuine interest in his face.

"The Kessler siblings?" he asked.

"As I understand it, they command considerable resources."

"Considerable?" Moran repeated.

A short laugh escaped him.

"My dear Mr. Sigurdsson, if they want something, they buy it. It is as simple as that."

He was silent for a moment.

"In fact," he continued more thoughtfully, "they may very well be the only real competitors to Ashcroft."

There was something remarkable in the way he pronounced the name. Not fear. Not respect. Rather irritation, as though Nathaniel Ashcroft was the one opponent on the board for whom he had not yet found the proper strategy.

"You know more of my plans than I had imagined," he said at last.

I did not answer.

"Then let me tell you something, Mr. Sigurdsson," he continued.

His tone remained calm, but it had acquired a firmness which left no doubt that he meant every word.

"If you or your friend are behind what has happened to my buyers, I shall discover it."

It was not phrased as a threat, and for that very reason it was all the more effective. He spoke with the same sober certainty with which an experienced hunter might describe a trail that he would sooner or later follow to its end. For another moment he remained silent. His gaze moved briefly away from me and into the dark street, as if his thoughts continued somewhere beyond the reach of words.

"But for the present," he continued slowly, "I actually do not believe that you are."

He turned his eyes back to me.

"I do not know why."

It seemed to me that the admission cost him more than the suspicion itself. Moran was not a man who cared for uncertainty. He preferred clear objectives, clear enemies, and clear explanations. Yet now he stood before events that did not fit into his own picture of the situation.

"Perhaps," he continued thoughtfully, "because you appear as puzzled as I am."

The words hung between us for a moment. It struck me how strange the situation truly was. For months we had circled each other as adversaries upon separate trails, and yet now we both stood before the same problem. There was an unknown hand in the game, a force that influ-

enced events without openly revealing itself, and neither of us seemed any longer entirely certain where it was to be found.

At last Moran gave a short nod, as though he had concluded some inner deliberation.

"Good evening, Mr. Sigurdsson."

I likewise raised my hat.

"Good evening, Colonel."

At that last word he paused for a moment. A fleeting smile appeared at the corner of his mouth, perhaps prompted by my deliberate use of the title he otherwise so seldom heard spoken. He made no comment upon it. Instead, he turned and disappeared with long strides down the dark street, until his figure dissolved among the shadows.

I remained standing for several seconds after his departure. The cool air still seemed to carry the echo of our conversation, and as I slowly began to walk back toward the more brightly lit parts of the city, I could not free myself from one particular thought.

For the first time since our arrival in New York, I had seen doubt in Sebastian Moran. He had discovered that someone was interfering with his plans, without knowing who. And I knew enough of men of his stamp to understand that just such uncertainty could become more dangerous than any open hostility. When a man like Moran no longer understands the rules of the game, he begins to search for the hidden hand that moves the pieces. And once he sets himself such a goal, the hunt often becomes as important to him as the prize itself.

Rebecca Kessler

As I approached our usual café the following morning, I caught sight of Moreau from some distance away. He was seated by the window with his back to the street and a cup of coffee before him. It struck me at once that this was the first time I had found him already in place before my arrival. Until then it had almost invariably been I who came first. The small deviation might have seemed insignificant, but during the past weeks of our collaboration I had learned that Moreau rarely did anything

without reason, and I therefore took his early arrival as a sign that he had something of importance to tell me.

My supposition soon proved correct. I had scarcely seated myself, ordered coffee, and taken out my pipe before he leaned forward across the table with that particular energy which I had by now come to know so well.

"I have spent the last two days on the Kessler siblings," he said.

I nodded encouragingly, and he continued.

His inquiries had first of all confirmed the impression we had already received. The Kessler firm had grown with remarkable speed during the past few years. What had once been a respectable gallery had become an institution with connections to collectors, auction houses, and art dealers on both sides of the Atlantic. They had built up a collection which, in Moreau's judgment, could compare with those of most museums, and they seemed almost always to emerge as the victors whenever rare works came upon the market.

"They buy anything that interests them," he said with a faint smile. "And so far no one has really been able to prevent them."

He gave a slight shrug.

"I could, of course, speculate as to where all the money comes from. Personally, I have my doubts as to how clean it all is. But that is not the interesting point in the present context."

I nodded.

"The interesting point is that they can pay."

"Precisely."

He took a sip of his coffee.

"If Saint Peter's Confession comes up for sale, they are among the few people in America who could compete with Nathaniel Ashcroft without difficulty."

It was an important piece of information, not least because it confirmed the thought which had already begun to form in my mind after my meeting with Moran the previous evening.

Moreau went on to tell me that, once he felt sufficiently informed, he had decided to pay a personal visit to the Kessler siblings. He had not

been fortunate enough to meet them both, but one of them, Rebecca Kessler, had received him.

He described her as a woman possessing that particular form of calm self-assurance found only in people who have for many years been accustomed to moving among powerful persons without feeling themselves inferior. She had been courteous but reserved; professional rather than warm. The situation, however, had changed noticeably when he told her that he had come from Paris.

"I believe," said Moreau, "that she immediately began to consider what opportunities I might represent."

He smiled slightly at the recollection. She had shown him through the gallery and spoken of various works, while at the same time making it clear that these represented only a small portion of the family's true possessions. There were storerooms, private collections, and separate warehouses to which the public was never granted access.

"It was very elegantly done," said Moreau. "She boasted without boasting."

After some time, he had decided to take the chance. He told her that his journey to America was not due solely to ordinary art business. On the contrary, he had come by way of Rome in connection with an object of a very particular kind. Already at the mention of Rome, her interest had been evident. And when he added that the object was of ecclesiastical origin, she no longer tried to conceal her attention.

"Can you tell me more?" she had asked.

Moreau had answered cautiously. Not enough to reveal too much, but enough to let her understand which document was in question.

He told me how, after a few seconds of silence, she had leaned back and studied him closely.

"If it is the document I believe it to be," she had said, "then we are not speaking of just any document."

"We are not," Moreau had replied.

She had nodded.

"It is unique."

Then a small smile had appeared.

"Perhaps one of the most desirable documents in existence."

"And one of the most expensive."

"Naturally."

Moreau explained that, at this point, the conversation had changed its character completely. They no longer spoke as art dealer and potential client. They spoke as two people who both knew that something extraordinary existed somewhere behind the curtain. She had asked whether he would still be interested if the document truly existed. He had answered that he would hardly have travelled all the way from Europe without having made his preparations.

"I am in a position to carry out the necessary transaction," he had said. "But first, of course, I must have certainty that we are speaking of the same document."

Rebecca Kessler had given no direct answer. Even so, she had hinted at more than she probably intended. For she had not denied the document's existence. In Moreau's opinion, she had almost taken it for granted.

Still more interesting was her final remark. When he asked when the document might possibly be shown, she had replied that it could hardly be done at once, but that it would probably be possible within a week.

Moreau looked at me over his coffee cup.

"A week, Holmes."

I grasped the significance at once. If his judgment was correct, it meant that someone was already working to bring the buyers together, and that the transaction was far more advanced than we had hitherto believed.

I must admit, Watson, that this information overshadowed almost everything else. Even the meeting with Moran the night before suddenly seemed less important. Moreau had not merely found another potential buyer. He had succeeded in hastening the whole process.

By deliberately presenting himself as a possible purchaser, he had created a new pressure upon all the other participants. If the Kessler siblings truly believed that a European collector stood ready with considerable means, they would be compelled to act more quickly. And the

more quickly they acted, the greater the pressure upon Ashcroft would become.

"It was skilfully done," I said sincerely.

Moreau nodded modestly.

"There may also have been a little luck in it."

"No," I replied. "It was good craftsmanship."

Only then did I tell him of my own meeting with Moran. He listened attentively and without interruption. When I reached the part in which Moran had mentioned the Kessler siblings by name, he slowly leaned back.

"So, he already knows."

"Yes."

"That is interesting."

He sat silent for some seconds.

"It means he is following developments more closely than we thought."

"And that he is worried."

Moreau nodded.

"Yes."

He smiled faintly.

"For the first time, it actually sounds as if he is."

We were both silent for a moment.

It seemed to me that the pieces were now moving more swiftly than before. The Cardinal was gone. Rosenfeld had been frightened. The Kessler siblings had stepped more clearly into view. Ashcroft waited somewhere in the background. And Moran, who for so long had seemed immovable, was now beginning to feel the pressure himself. The game was undoubtedly approaching a new stage.

"There will be an auction," Moreau said at last.

I nodded.

"Yes."

He smiled slightly.

"And probably a rather dramatic one."

There was not much more to be said on that matter. We both knew that the next move did not lie in our hands. We depended upon Camille Ardent. If anyone knew the time and place of the coming confrontation, it had to be she. It therefore seemed natural to us to let that part of the matter rest until new information arrived. There were, however, still other trails to follow. Upon the table between us lay the names from Samuel Pierce, like silent reminders of the work that still awaited us.

Thomas McKenna.

Patrick O'Donnell.

Two men who, each in his own way, had once stood close to Ashcroft's world and had later slipped out of it.

Or been pushed out.

The more I thought of it, the more these people seemed to me to hold the key to understanding the whole system. The loyal told us only what Ashcroft wished the world to see. The deviants, on the other hand, told us what happened when someone ceased to move with the current.

In order to save time, we therefore decided to divide the work between us.

Moreau had already established a network of contacts around the harbour, the art world, and labor circles, which made him the natural choice in regard to Thomas McKenna. I myself would await his information concerning Patrick O'Donnell and then seek out the former police leader alone.

The plan was simple.

Over the next few days, each of us would complete his inquiries. Then we would meet again at the Manhattan Music Hall, exchange our results, and at the same time attempt to make contact with Camille.

It seemed to me, as we finally rose from the table, that we both felt the same cautious optimism. Not because the case was near its solution. Quite the contrary. But because the many loose threads which had so long pointed in different directions now seemed slowly to be drawing toward a common point.

When we parted outside the café, the morning sun stood high above the roofs of New York. The city hummed with the same unshakable

energy as always, but for the first time since my arrival I had the feeling that events were moving faster than we were.

Somewhere out there, Moran was working upon his auction.

Somewhere else, Ashcroft was preparing his answer.

And between them both stood people such as Moreau, Camille Ardent, and the men we had not yet met—deviants, former allies, and forgotten witnesses—each of whom carried a fragment of the truth.

With these thoughts we left one another.

I watched Moreau disappear into the human current toward the south, while I myself set out in the direction of the boarding house. It struck me that we were both going toward our separate tasks with a feeling which had been rare throughout this entire affair.

Expectation

Not merely of what we might find, but of what would happen when all those who now moved around Saint Peter's Confession were finally forced to meet face to face.

I lay the letter aside and remain seated for a moment, my gaze resting upon the flames in the fireplace.

During the evening the cold has crept farther into the house, and I therefore rise to place another log upon the fire. The wood crackles at once, and new flames lick up along the dark pieces of coal which already glow between the iron bars. On the side table stands the kettle, and I fill it with fresh water before setting it back over the heat. There are still many hours of reading before me, and I have gradually learned that Holmes' letters are best enjoyed with a warm cup of tea within reach.

When I return to the desk, my eyes fall upon the pile of letters which, over these past weeks, has dominated both my worktable and my thoughts.

It has grown considerably smaller.

For the first time since I began this review, I have the clear sensation that the journey is nearing its end.

It is not merely the number of letters that tells me so. It is also felt in the very movement of the narrative. The many persons who once

seemed to wander in and out of the case without any clear connection have gradually been drawn toward the same center. The threads are gathering. The positions are being marked out. Even without knowing the outcome, I can sense that particular tension which so often arises immediately before a climax.

Whether the release will be happy or catastrophic, I do not yet know.

But I feel its nearness.

Saint Peter's Confession has become more than a document.

For the Kessler siblings, it probably represents the ultimate transaction, a trophy among many other trophies. I do not doubt their passion for art, but I cannot help wondering whether the document would, in the end, have become yet another treasure in a private collection, inaccessible to all others.

For Nathaniel Ashcroft, its significance appears to be different. The more I read, the stronger becomes my conviction that, for him, the document represents something far greater than money. He has built hotels, museums, and public buildings. He has gathered art, property, and influence. But Saint Peter's Confession seems almost the final rung of a ladder he has been climbing all his life, as though the document could give his name the historical weight of which he can otherwise only dream. A man cannot buy immortality, but many have attempted to buy themselves as close to it as possible.

Moran, in his own way, finds himself in a similar position. He naturally desires the highest possible price, but I have become increasingly convinced that money alone has never been his true driving force. He wants the triumph. He wants the drama. He wants the perfect conclusion to a game that has stretched across continents and oceans. Perhaps he even wants the audience as much as the gain.

Moreau seeks something altogether different. He seeks the explanation. Throughout his investigation he has pursued patterns, connections, and the movement of money. He wishes to understand how the many forgeries, thefts, and strange transactions in the European art world are connected. For him, the document is not the goal, but the key.

There is, in other words, far more at stake than the ownership of a single piece of parchment.

I let my hand pass over the remaining letters and select the next.

On the front, in Holmes' characteristic handwriting, stands: *Patrick O'Donnell.*

I break the seal and begin to read.

The Eleventh Letter

February 21, 1892
New York City

My dear Watson,
Looking back now upon events, it seems to me almost inevitable that Moreau and I should have divided the work between us in precisely the manner we did. I do not know whether the decision was the result of logic or instinct, but to both of us it seemed natural.

Thomas McKenna, the labor leader, would undoubtedly be able to tell us much about Ashcroft's relations with the workers and the great building projects. Yet at that moment I suspected that his story would more likely confirm what we already knew than add anything truly new.

Patrick O'Donnell was another matter.

If there existed concrete evidence of lawbreaking, corruption, or manipulation of the authorities, it seemed likely that a former police leader might be the man who had come closest to it.

For that reason, the choice fell upon him.

The Journey South
Holmes went on to describe how the address reached him later that same evening through Moreau's network. O'Donnell no longer lived in New York, but in a smaller community to the south, in the direction of New Jersey.

At the boarding house, Holmes made inquiries as to the easiest route. He mentioned the road name to the landlord, who immediately shook his head at the thought of taking a cab the whole way.

"Take the train, sir," he had advised. "It will save you both time and money."

Holmes followed the advice.

The next morning, therefore, he found himself upon one of the many railway lines that led out from the city. He later described how fascinating the American railway network seemed to him. In his opinion, nothing had meant more to the growth of the nation. Farmers, manufacturers, merchants, and immigrants had been bound together by steel rails which crossed the continent as veins carry blood through a living organism. The train moved steadily onward.

In less than an hour the surroundings began gradually to change. The factories became fewer. Brick gave way to wooden houses. The dense streets disappeared. Fields and open spaces appeared between the small communities.

Holmes noticed how quickly the transition took place. In many ways it reminded him of London, where, after a relatively short journey, one could leave the world's greatest capital and suddenly find oneself in the midst of the English countryside.

New York had the same quality. The enormous city filled one's thoughts while one was within it, but only a few miles beyond its limits it already began to feel distant.

As the train rolled on through the winter-grey landscape, Holmes sat by the window and watched the view. For the first time in several days, he had no immediate plan beyond the object of his journey. Only the road toward yet another of those people who had once stood close to Nathaniel Ashcroft, and who had since been pushed out of his circle.

Holmes did not yet know whether Patrick O'Donnell would prove to be an important piece or merely another bitter man with old stories. But after the meetings with Samuel Pierce and Senator Whitmore, he had begun to sense a pattern, and if the pattern continued, the former police leader might very well prove to be the most interesting of them all.

A Man at Peace

The house lay in one of the smaller suburbs west of New York and, at first glance, gave an impression quite different from both Whitmore's lonely sawmill and Samuel Pierce's modest office. There was nothing ostentatious about the property, but everything was well kept. The garden was orderly. The paint on the woodwork was fresh. The windows were clean. The whole place breathed the quiet security of a man who had found his place in life.

I was therefore forced at once to conclude that Patrick O'Donnell had apparently not suffered the same fate as several of the other deviants we had already met. Whatever had happened in New York, it had cost him neither his home nor his dignity.

I knocked upon the door and was met by his wife, who kindly explained that her husband had just gone out on a small errand, but was expected back at any moment. When I mentioned that I had come from some distance, she offered without hesitation to let me wait inside.

As I sat in the comfortable parlour and observed my surroundings, I could not help noticing the contrast with Senator Whitmore's home. Here there were no traces of resignation or surrender. On the contrary, photographs of children and family stood upon shelves and bookcases. There were books which had plainly been read. Fresh flowers stood upon the windowsill. Everything suggested a home in which people still shared their daily life.

Shortly afterward the front door sounded, and Patrick O'Donnell entered. He stopped for a moment at the sight of me and looked questioningly at his wife before she explained the situation. His surprise, however, lasted only a few seconds. He greeted me politely and took a seat opposite me.

I naturally had to present myself with suitable caution. I described myself as a European with an interest in art, who through various inquiries into the movement of art through New York had come upon his name on several occasions. The description plainly struck him as somewhat cryptic, and he therefore asked me to explain more clearly what I meant.

I then told him that my inquiries had particularly concerned certain works of art and collections which had, at one time or another, found their way into buildings and institutions owned by Nathaniel Ashcroft, and that during this work I had several times encountered notes and remarks suggesting that not everything had necessarily been done by the book.

When I mentioned Ashcroft's name, O'Donnell smiled slowly.

"So," he said, "now it appears that even people from Europe have become acquainted with how things are done in New York."

He leaned back and shook his head slightly.

"Fortunately, I got away from there in time."

There was neither bitterness nor anger in his voice, but rather that particular calm which often marks people who have put a struggle behind them and accepted its outcome.

"That city lies in the pocket of men like Ashcroft," he continued. "But do sit down properly."

The conversation then moved naturally to his years in the police. He told me of cases in which competitors had been subjected to vandalism, of strange disappearances at building sites, of threats, extortion, and intimidation. The stories resembled in many ways those we had already heard from other deviants. The difference was that O'Donnell had seen them from the side of the authorities.

"The list is long," he said thoughtfully. "And again and again the tracks point in the same direction."

"Ashcroft?" I asked.

A new smile passed over his face.

"You clearly do not know the rules of the game in New York, Mr. Sigurdsson."

I asked him to explain.

"Nothing is personal," he replied. "One man thinks. Another acts. A third pays. A fourth carries it out. In the end some poor devil is left standing there to take the blame. That is how the system works."

He made a slight gesture with his hand.

"That is why the small man ends in prison while the great one continues his career."

I then asked him about his own story.

He nodded, as if the question had been expected.

"I was well placed. Very well placed, in fact. At one time there was talk that I might end as commissioner."

He was silent for a moment.

"But I had a bad habit."

"And what was that?"

"I did not listen to hints."

There was a gleam of humour in his eyes.

"They began cautiously. Small pieces of advice. Little suggestions. People who wanted certain cases given less attention. Others who wanted extra attention. Sometimes money came with it. At other times promises."

He shrugged.

"I was fool enough to ignore it all."

Shortly afterward his wife came in with coffee, and as she distributed the cups he turned toward her with a warm look.

"It cost me my future in New York."

"But it gave you something else," I observed.

He smiled.

"Yes."

His gaze moved around the room.

"It did."

When his wife had left the room again, he continued more seriously.

"We moved here. Life is smaller here. The opportunities are fewer. But people know one another. And most important of all: there is no Ashcroft here."

The Shadow of Ashcroft

I asked him whether any actual case had ever been brought against the great building magnate.

O'Donnell slowly shook his head.

"Not to my knowledge."

"But you must have had suspicions."

"Many."

"And evidence?"

He hesitated for a moment.

"The problem is not the evidence."

That answer surprised me.

"Then what is the problem?"

"Distance."

He leaned forward.

"If a man disappears from a building site, there may be six or seven links between that event and a man like Ashcroft. If a competitor has his premises smashed, there are still more."

He shook his head.

"Ordinarily, one follows the money. But at that level money almost ceases to be interesting. People act out of ambition. Out of loyalty. Out of expectation. Out of fear. They no longer need instructions."

His words made me think of Camille Ardent's marionettes. Precisely the same thought seemed to have touched O'Donnell, though he himself was unaware of it.

"So, you do not believe it would be possible to bring him down?" I asked.

"Realistically?"

He considered.

"No."

The answer came without hesitation.

"Not in that way."

I let the matter rest for a moment before asking what had gradually become the most important question.

"What is his weakness?"

O'Donnell looked at me searchingly.

"That is an interesting question."

He sat silent for a long time.

"I do not actually think his weakness lies with his enemies."

"Where, then?"

"In himself."

I noticed the phrasing at once.

"What do you mean by that?"

"He is used to having his own way."

He smiled faintly.

"Such men do not become dangerous because they meet resistance. They become dangerous because they never meet it."

His gaze grew distant.

"If Ashcroft is ever truly challenged by someone whom he cannot control, I honestly do not know how he will react."

Beyond Reach

I felt his words remain in my thoughts long after they had been spoken. Both Whitmore and O'Donnell, quite independently of one another, had arrived at almost the same conclusion. They had both described a man who had built around himself a system so effective and so loyal that opposition had almost ceased to exist. If there was a weakness, perhaps it lay precisely there.

We spoke for a while longer of lesser matters, but the conversation had reached its natural end. O'Donnell was not a man who lingered over the past longer than necessity required. On the contrary, he seemed genuinely content with the life he had found outside New York's circles of power and ambition. When we rose, I thanked both him and his wife for their hospitality, and they accompanied me to the door. A moment later, as I stood outside upon the quiet suburban road, I could not help reflecting upon the strange difference between the people we had sought out. Whitmore had lost almost everything and lived with his defeats as a constant companion. Pierce had preserved his dignity, though not his position. O'Donnell, by contrast, seemed to me the only one who had truly made peace with what had happened, perhaps because he had not fought to regain what he had lost, or perhaps because he had chosen something else.

On the journey back toward Manhattan, I sat for a long time by the window and watched the landscape pass by. The small towns, factory buildings, and open fields succeeded one another at an even pace, while my thoughts circled continually around the conversation of the day. I had not found the breakthrough for which, in secret, I had hoped. There were no hidden archives, no incriminating documents, no decisive error committed by Nathaniel Ashcroft. And yet I did not feel that the journey had been in vain.

When the skyline of New York once more appeared in the distance through the afternoon haze, I found myself thinking less of Ashcroft than of Moreau. If either of us was to find a trail that led beyond mere understanding, it would almost certainly be he. I sincerely hoped that his meeting with Thomas McKenna had yielded more tangible results than my own visit. For although I now understood the system better than before, one thing remained with almost the same force as at the beginning of my investigation: I could see the shadow of Nathaniel Ashcroft's power everywhere, yet the man himself still seemed to remain beyond reach.

Camille's Answer

When, some evenings later, we met at the Manhattan Music Hall, it quickly became clear that Moreau's inquiries had not led to the breakthrough for which we had both hoped.

We had found our usual table, and while the noise of the hall slowly rose around us, he told me of his visit to Thomas McKenna. The former labor leader now lived a life far removed from the position he had once held. Moreau had found him in the harbour district, where he was said to spend most of his days among various cheap taverns. His story had been a sad one, perhaps the saddest of all those we had so far encountered.

McKenna had attempted to steer a course between employers and workers, between interests which could rarely be reconciled. At one point he had entered into agreements concerning several of the great building projects behind which Ashcroft stood. The intention may well have been reasonable enough, but the result had been disastrous. The

workers had regarded him as a traitor, while the building companies had never regarded him as one of their own. In the end, he had lost both sides at once.

"He was crushed between the wheels," Moreau said quietly.

I nodded.

It was an exact description.

Like the other deviants, McKenna had been able to tell of the same pattern: of people who suddenly lost contracts, of projects that were stopped, of rumours that seemed to arise of their own accord, and of a system that reacted against anyone who moved contrary to its interests. But neither had he been able to point to anything that could form the basis of an actual case against Nathaniel Ashcroft.

"A tragic fate," Moreau concluded after a pause.

"Yes," I answered. "That was my thought as well."

I then told him of my visit to Patrick O'Donnell and of the quite different fate that had befallen the former police leader. He had understood the signals in time and had chosen to leave the city before the struggle destroyed him. Yet with him too I had found the same fundamental story: the same pressure, the same invisible force which gradually made life more difficult for anyone who placed himself across Ashcroft's interests.

When I had finished, we both sat silent for a moment. We had confirmed our theory, but not much more. We now knew far more about the system than before, yet we still lacked the key that could open it.

Our hopes that evening were therefore directed toward a very different person.

Camille Ardent.

If anyone knew how matters were developing around the document and the approaching auction, it would almost certainly be she.

She did not appear on the stage that evening, but a little later we caught sight of her among the guests. She moved through the room with the same natural elegance she displayed in her performances, and in several places, people stopped her in order to exchange a few words.

At one point we noticed that she was standing in conversation with Moran. He seemed occupied with other guests around him, and when

the opportunity presented itself, Camille slipped effortlessly away from the company and approached our table.

"Good evening, gentlemen," she said with a smile.

We both rose slightly and greeted her.

Moreau thanked her once more for the performance, and I added my own praise.

"Your marionette play has given me more to think about than I first believed possible," I said. "The more I consider it, the more remarkable it seems to me."

She smiled, as though she had heard similar remarks before, yet appreciated them all the same.

"I am glad."

"It was an unusually illustrative piece," I continued. "I doubt that everyone in the audience took the same meaning from it."

"I should hope not," she replied.

For a moment none of us said anything. The noise of the hall continued around us, and from the stage came the first notes of the next performance, yet at our table it seemed to me that the conversation had moved into a region where no one wished any longer to speak directly.

Moreau leaned a little forward.

"The game is beginning to fall into place," he said quietly.

Camille looked at him for a brief moment. There was neither surprise nor inquiry in her face, but rather the thoughtful calm of one who has already considered the same thing.

"Yes," she answered at last. "I feel that too."

The manner in which the words were spoken made a greater impression upon me than the words themselves. It was not the answer of a woman who was guessing. It sounded rather like the answer of a person who had herself observed the growing tension around events.

Moreau nodded slowly.

"The only thing we lack now is the time."

A faint smile appeared on her mouth.

"Yes," she said. "Perhaps."

It was a modest answer, but it was enough.

I noticed how her glance moved for an instant between us, as if she wished to assure herself that we understood more than had actually been said. No information had been exchanged. No names were mentioned. No dates. And yet I was left with the distinct impression that she knew something which had not yet reached our ears.

Then her face changed again into the more open and sociable expression we knew from the stage.

"I must return to my guests," she said kindly. "But I am glad to see that you both still find your way here."

We rose slightly and thanked her once again for the performance. She nodded, wished us a good evening, and then disappeared through the room with the same ease with which she moved across the boards of the stage.

Only when she was out of hearing did Moreau lean back.

"That was probably the answer we could hope for."

I nodded without immediately speaking.

It was a strange feeling. We had received no actual information. Nothing concrete had been said. Yet I was left with a growing conviction that something was gathering. It lay in her voice, in her certainty, and in the manner in which she had received Moreau's remark without the slightest surprise.

The Twelfth Letter

February 28, 1892
New York City

My dear Watson,
Moreau and I resolved to spend the following evenings at the Manhattan Music Hall. There was no reason to risk missing a message from Camille Ardent merely because we happened to be elsewhere in the city. By this point it seemed to both of us that the waiting had become part of the case itself.

The evenings passed with various entertainments upon the stage and the usual current of guests moving through the room. On some nights both Moran and Camille were present; on others we saw neither of them.

My observations of Moran, however, pointed in one direction only. He was elated, and more than that, he seemed almost radiant. I had seen him in many moods since our first meeting in Rome, but rarely so relaxed as now. There was something in the way he moved through the room, something in his conversations and in his assurance, which told me that he regarded the game as won. The auction had fallen into place. Now he was merely waiting for it to be carried out.

Toward the end of the week Moreau and I were seated at our usual table. A couple of beers stood before us, and the smoke from our pipes rose slowly toward the ceiling while we discussed various possible outcomes of the approaching transaction.

It was then that a young waiter passed by. There was nothing unusual about his appearance. He did not even stop at the table but merely set

down a small tray between our glasses and continued on through the room. Upon the tray lay a folded piece of paper. I picked it up and opened it. There were only a few words: *Saturday, 7 p.m.Warehouse 21, South Street Seaport.* Nothing more. No signature. No explanation. No instructions beyond those few words upon the paper. And yet neither of us had the least doubt as to what the message meant.

I let my eyes rest upon the note for a moment before passing it across the table to Moreau. He took it without a word, read it slowly through, and then left it lying before him, his fingers still resting upon the paper.

All around us the evening continued as before. Music sounded from the stage. Glasses rang. Waiters moved between the tables. Conversations rose and fell like waves upon a shore. Yet at our table it seemed to me that all this had suddenly receded to a great distance.

Moreau leaned back and drew a slow breath.

"So, it is now," he said.

There was no triumph in his voice, but rather the calm statement of a man who has long awaited a particular moment and now sees it approaching.

I nodded.

For weeks we had followed trails, sought out people, and gathered fragments of a story which had often seemed without coherence. Now all those movements appeared at last to be pointing toward the same spot. I remember sitting for some minutes without truly listening to what was taking place around me. My thoughts circled around the people who would soon find themselves beneath the same roof.

Ashcroft. Moran. The Kessler siblings. And perhaps others who had not yet shown their hand.

Moreau seemed to be thinking along the same lines.

"I have waited a long time to see him in such a situation," he said after a while.

"Under opposition?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Yes. Real opposition."

His gaze moved toward the window, where the lights of New York could be glimpsed through the darkness beyond.

"Whitmore may have been right."

I needed no further explanation. We were both thinking of the former senator's remark that Ashcroft surrounded himself with people who nodded long before he had finished his sentences; people who instinctively worked in his favour; people who made his goals their own.

But on Saturday he would stand before something different. Not necessarily an enemy, but several opponents.

That, perhaps, was more unusual in Nathaniel Ashcroft's world than we had at first understood.

We spoke for a while longer about practical matters and agreed to meet the following afternoon at our usual café. There was no reason to leave anything to chance. If the auction developed as we expected, the evening might come to matter far beyond the question of the document's ownership.

The Auction in the Warehouse

My dear Watson,
On Saturday Moreau and I arrived at Warehouse 21 on South Street long before the other participants.

The building lay dark and silent toward the harbour. Only a few lamps cast their dull light over the quay, and from the river came the familiar mixture of lapping water, machinery, and distant steam whistles.

After a brief examination we found a rear door which time had treated less kindly than the rest of the building. The hinges sat loose, and with a little caution we managed to create an opening sufficient for us to enter without leaving visible traces. Once inside, we set the door back in place as well as we could and then moved into the great storage room.

The warehouse was considerably larger than I had expected. Crates, barrels, and various forms of goods were stacked in long rows, and at the far end we found a group of large shipping cases which gave us an excellent view of the room without making us visible.

We had scarcely settled ourselves before we heard the sound of a key in the main door.

"Already?" whispered Moreau.

I nodded.

A few minutes later Sebastian Moran entered. He was alone.

The first thing that struck me was how much at home he seemed. He moved through the room with the same natural ease as a host in his own drawing room. Without haste he began lighting the various lamps, and gradually the darkness withdrew from the building.

Then Moran began his preparations.

From our hiding place we could observe him without being seen. He worked calmly and without haste, like a man who had performed the same task many times before. First he drew a solid table away from the wall and placed it in the center of the floor beneath the glow of the lamps. Then he brought out the chairs one by one and arranged them before the table with almost ceremonial care. I counted them instinctively.

There were six.

At last, he lifted his valise onto the table and placed it precisely before him, after which he took a step back and considered the result.

The longer we watched Moran, the clearer it became that this did not resemble an ordinary transaction. There was something almost theatrical about the whole arrangement: the table, the chairs, the light, the waiting. It seemed to me more and more as though we were witnessing the preparations for a performance.

I could not help thinking of Camille Ardent and her marionette play. Perhaps the difference was not as great as it had first appeared.

When everything stood as he wished it, Moran seated himself in the chair behind the table. He leaned back with his hands folded before him and let his gaze move through the empty warehouse. He appeared entirely at ease, like a host awaiting his guests.

We did not have long to wait. A few minutes later footsteps sounded outside, and the main door opened. The first to enter were the Kessler siblings. They appeared precisely as I had imagined them: well dressed, well groomed, and possessed of that particular calm which often be-

longs to people accustomed to acquiring whatever they desire. There was nothing demonstrative in their manner. On the contrary, they moved with a discreet self-possession which made a far stronger impression than any form of boasting could have done.

Moran rose, welcomed them, and exchanged only a few words with them. Then he indicated the seats in the front row. They sat without question and immediately began to examine the room and the other chairs, which still stood empty.

Shortly afterward the door opened again. This time, to my surprise, it was Mr. Rosenfeld.

His appearance stood in sharp contrast to that of the Kesslers. Where they seemed relaxed, he appeared tense. He looked about him as though he had not yet fully decided whether he ought to be present at all. When he saw Moran, he greeted him politely, but with a certain reserve. I had the impression that he still did not feel entirely safe in his company.

He took a place a little to one side and sat with his hands folded before him, silently regarding the document case upon the table.

The next guest immediately engaged our interest. He was unknown to both Moreau and me, yet there was something in his appearance that at once caught our attention. His dark clothing was simple but plainly of high quality, and his whole bearing revealed a man accustomed to respect without needing to demand it. Although he wore no actual clerical dress, there was a dignity about him which made it natural to suppose that he represented the Church. He was not the cardinal; that we could see at once. But he was probably an emissary or trusted representative sent in his place.

Moran received him with the same courtesy he had shown the other guests, indicated a seat, and exchanged only a few words with him. The man nodded, sat in the rear row, and thereafter remained silent. He did not seem interested in conversation. His attention was already fixed upon the table, the valise, and the approaching event.

After his arrival, another brief silence settled over the warehouse. The lamplight cast long shadows across the floorboards, and outside one could now and then hear distant sounds from the harbour. None of

those present spoke much. It was as though all sensed that the evening was approaching its true purpose.

When the door was next opened, both Moreau and I were genuinely surprised.

Camille Ardent entered.

She was not dressed for the stage, and yet she seemed to bring something of the stage's world with her. Even in her simple attire she possessed the same natural elegance and composure which had made her the center of attention on so many occasions. There was nothing strained in her appearance. On the contrary, she seemed entirely at home in the situation, as though she already knew the plot of the piece and had merely come to witness the final act.

She greeted Moran kindly, nodded in recognition to Rosenfeld, and took a seat beside him. I found it difficult to imagine her as an actual buyer. Her whole manner pointed in another direction. She seemed to me rather a witness, or perhaps an audience. Like an artist who had recognised a performance in progress and now wished to see how it would end.

After her arrival the atmosphere became still more expectant. All the seats were now occupied except one, and even though no one said it aloud, we all knew who was still missing.

We heard him before we saw him. The sound of horses' hooves reached us through the night long before the carriage stopped outside the warehouse, first as a distant rhythm against the paving stones, then clearer and clearer, until it ceased abruptly just outside the building. A moment later firm steps sounded on the pavement, followed by the opening of the door. Nathaniel Ashcroft entered.

I have seldom met a man who conveyed so strongly the impression of belonging wherever he found himself. He did not enter as a guest invited to an event. He entered as a man who expected the event to have been waiting for him.

His gaze moved swiftly through the room. He registered the Kessler siblings, Rosenfeld, the Church's representative, and Camille Ardent.

For a moment his eyes rested on Moran, who sat calmly behind the table. Then he took his place without further remark.

By this time every chair was occupied. The auction room was full.

And yet my sense that we were still only at the beginning grew stronger with every passing minute. There was something in the atmosphere of the room, something in Moran, and something in the people he had gathered that evening, which made the whole affair seem far more than a transaction.

It resembled the beginning of a performance. And, as so often before, I had not yet perceived what role each of the participants was meant to play.

For a moment nothing happened. Moran remained standing at the table with his hands resting lightly upon its edge, while his gaze traveled slowly from one guest to the next. It seemed to me that he enjoyed the moment, not merely because the auction was at last to begin, but because all the people who for months had circled around the document were now gathered in the same room. The Kessler siblings sat calm and inscrutable. Rosenfeld still appeared uneasy, as though he did not entirely understand why he had been invited. The Church's emissary sat upright with folded hands, while Camille Ardent observed it all with an almost theatrical interest. Even Ashcroft seemed, for the moment, willing to await the course of events.

Moran Performs

Moran drew a deep breath and seemed about to open the auction, but just as he parted his lips to speak, Moreau and I stepped forward from the shadows between the crates.

I do not believe that anyone present had expected our appearance. Rosenfeld almost started in his chair. The Kesslers exchanged a quick glance. Even Ashcroft turned sharply toward us with an expression which, for the first time, revealed genuine surprise. Only Moran remained remarkably composed. First, he raised his eyebrows; then his gaze moved over the two additional chairs which we had brought with us from among the crates, and slowly a smile spread across his face.

It was neither a mocking smile nor a friendly one. Rather, it expressed the peculiar pleasure felt by an experienced gambler when a game suddenly becomes more interesting than he himself had planned.

"I had set out six chairs," he said, considering the arrangement before him. "But I have never objected to improvisation."

His eyes met mine first, then Moreau's.

"On the contrary," he continued. "I had almost hoped that you would come. Take your seats, gentlemen. You are most welcome to witness the performance."

A low laugh sounded from Camille Ardent, which at once made me think of the marionette play and of the many conversations we had had since that evening. Moran himself drew back his chair and sat down as though nothing unusual had occurred, and after a brief hesitation Moreau and I accepted his invitation.

Only when we had taken our seats did he resume the thread. He laid his hand upon the valise before him and spoke with the calm assurance of a man who found himself on his own ground.

He welcomed his guests. There was an almost solemn note in his words, as though he were presiding not over a transaction but over a ceremony. He spoke of the document's history, of its long journey through Europe, and of the significance it had acquired through its rarity. Throughout the presentation his hand rested upon the valise, and I noticed how every gaze returned to it again and again.

When the bidding began, it did so at first with a certain restraint. Rosenfeld participated politely, but without conviction, and after only a few minutes it became clear that he had never possessed any real possibility of competing with the others. Shortly afterward the representative of the Church also withdrew, doing so with dignity and without any visible disappointment.

There remained now the two parties whom everyone had in truth been awaiting: Rebecca Kessler and her brother on one side, Nathaniel Ashcroft on the other.

The price rose steadily, at first in calm increments and then more rapidly. Sums which would have ruined most men were named with the

same ease with which others order another cup of coffee. The Kesslers preserved their composure throughout. Ashcroft did the same, yet as the bids increased, I began to discern a difference. His replies came more quickly. His movements grew less relaxed. And though his voice remained calm, I sensed beneath it a growing irritation. It was not the money that troubled him. It was the resistance he had not expected.

It seemed to me now that he sat opposite people who neither feared him nor felt obliged to bend to his will, and the longer the auction continued, the more clearly it became apparent that this very fact was beginning to affect him far more than he wished to show.

My dear Watson,

I shall not pretend that, at this point, I did not expect the auction to continue for some considerable time. Nothing suggested otherwise. The tension grew with every bid, and the higher the sums climbed, the more attentive everyone present became.

Moran stood at the table like a conductor before his orchestra. His face almost shone with pleasure each time a new bid was made. The document lay before him upon the table, still closed and inaccessible, and yet it was the natural center of every eye in the room.

The amounts now rose in leaps which would have made most businessmen catch their breath.

The Kesslers remained remarkably calm. Rebecca Kessler exchanged a glance now and then with her brother, but otherwise their bidding proceeded almost without visible emotion. They seemed like people who had made their decision in advance and were now merely following a plan.

Ashcroft was different. To an outsider he might perhaps have appeared as controlled as ever. His voice remained quiet, his back erect, his hands still resting easily upon the arms of his chair. Yet after the many months in which I had studied him from a distance, I began to notice small changes.

Several times he took his eyes from the document and instead regarded the Kesslers with an intensity which revealed that it was no longer the document alone that occupied him.

I believe, Watson, that it was the first time I saw him encounter people whom he could neither impress nor dominate.

When another bid was made by the Kesslers, and Ashcroft immediately answered with an increase, Moran leaned back a little and looked from one side to the other with an almost investigative expression.

Then it happened.

Without any visible cause, he raised his hand.

The gesture was so simple that at first it seemed to mean nothing. Yet its effect was immediate. The words died away. Every eye gathered upon him. Even the light from the hanging lamps seemed, in that moment, to stand still above the table.

Moran allowed the silence to live a moment longer than most men would have done. He looked about him as though to ensure that he had the full attention of everyone present, and only then did he begin to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said calmly, "I have spent several years finding this document and bringing it here."

His hand rested lightly upon the valise.

"Naturally, I have also thought of the money. I should insult you all by pretending otherwise."

A faint smile passed over his face.

"But the truth is that the money was never the most interesting part."

Now confusion began to spread around the table. I saw Rebecca Kessler frown. Rosenfeld lifted his head. Even Ashcroft looked at him questioningly.

Moran let his gaze move through the assembled company.

"No," he continued. "What interested me was seeing who would come."

He let the words hang in the air. No one answered. No one seemed entirely to understand what he meant. Even the Kesslers, who until now had appeared wholly untouched by events, looked at him with open bewilderment. Rosenfeld shifted uneasily in his chair, and the Church's emissary slowly raised his head.

Moran, however, appeared in no hurry.

"I wished to see," he continued thoughtfully, "who would cross half a continent for this document. Who would pay fortunes for it. Who believed that he, or she, possessed the strongest claim to own it."

His gaze moved from one to another.

"You see," he said, "a document seldom tells us only about its author. Often it tells us even more about the people who wish to possess it."

There came a slight movement from Ashcroft, and though others might not have attached importance to it, I noticed it at once. Throughout the evening, he had sat with the same calm dignity which had marked him on every occasion when I had seen him. He had been a man who seemed entirely at home in every situation, as though the world, in the end, would always arrange itself according to his wishes. But now a small crack had appeared in that façade. Not large enough for the others necessarily to observe, but sufficient for me to do so.

His gaze no longer rested upon the document. It rested upon Moran. He was plainly trying to understand what was actually taking place.

Moran, by contrast, seemed perfectly at ease. He stood at the end of the table with the same relaxed bearing as before, but there was now something almost reflective in his face, as though only now were he approaching the true purpose of the evening.

"You began to bore me"

At last, it was Ashcroft who broke the silence.

"You have wasted my time."

His voice was not loud. On the contrary, it was remarkably controlled. Yet for that very reason it seemed all the more threatening. It was not an outburst of anger, but the controlled irritation of a man unaccustomed to being made the object of another's judgment.

Moran looked at him with genuine interest.

"Have I?"

"Yes."

Ashcroft leaned forward a little.

"I came to buy a document. Not to take part in a performance."

At the word performance, an almost imperceptible smile passed over Camille's face. She said nothing, but I could not help thinking of the marionette play and of that strange evening when she had shown us how people sometimes continue to move in the same direction even after the strings have been cut.

Moran noticed it too.

"But you see," he said, almost pleasantly, "I have always had a weakness for performances."

He let his gaze pass around the room, then turned back to Ashcroft.

"I must admit that you interested me greatly at first."

Ashcroft did not reply, but his eyes did not leave Moran for an instant.

"Your certainty fascinated me. Your style. Your way of moving through the world. One received the impression that nothing ever surprised you."

Moran paused for a moment, as though seeking the exact formulation.

"But later you began to bore me."

I believe, Watson, that any other insult would have been easier for Ashcroft to bear. Boredom is something different. It strips a man of significance.

And now I saw a true emotional reaction in him. Not anger alone, but something deeper, something very like wounded vanity.

Moran, however, continued in the same calm tone, as though he were merely carrying on an ordinary conversation.

"You always play with favourable cards. You surround yourself with people who already agree with you. You permit no real uncertainty. No real surprises. And therefore, in the end, one always knows how the story will conclude."

He gave a slight shrug.

"It becomes very efficient."

A faint smile appeared.

"But rarely very interesting."

No one spoke. The air in the old warehouse seemed to have grown heavier.

It seemed to me that we were all waiting to see what would happen next, and yet at the same time I understood that the decisive event had already taken place. The auction was no longer about the document. It was about the people seated around the table and the judgment to which each of them had unwillingly been summoned.

When Moran at last placed his hand upon the document and declared the Kesslers the winners, the decision seemed almost a formality. The true contest had already taken place, and it had been decided long before the final words were spoken.

The Thirteenth Letter

What happened afterward, Watson, is comparatively easy to tell.

Ashcroft remained seated for a brief moment after Moran's decision. I do not believe that any of us expected an outburst of rage. Men such as he seldom loses their composure in public. Yet when at last he rose, it seemed to me that his whole figure trembled with an inward tension which he restrained only with the greatest difficulty.

He looked first at Moran, then at the document, and then at the Kesslers. None of this had formed part of his plan.

Without a word he turned and walked toward the door, and no one spoke or made any attempt to stop him. A moment later we heard the door slam behind him, and shortly afterward came the sound of his carriage's hoofbeats disappearing into the night along the quay.

The silence remained in the room. It was as though the whole company needed a moment to comprehend what had just occurred.

As agreed, the Kesslers took possession of the document. Rosenfeld was granted access to it for a scholarly examination, and several copies were made under his supervision. No one wished the document to vanish from history again.

The greatest surprise came when the Kesslers made public their plans for *Saint Peter's Confession*. They had decided to donate the document to the Church.

I shall not presume to judge their motives. Perhaps it was generosity. Perhaps it was respect for the document's origin, or perhaps they merely

wished to be remembered for something other than their fortune. But in the end the document found its way back to the institution which had preserved its history through the centuries.

And what, then, of the text itself?

Well, Watson, if I know you rightly, its contents will hardly surprise you. For several of us who sat in the warehouse that evening, however, it made a considerable impression.

Saint Peter's Confession

When the seals were at last broken, and Rosenfeld, with his usual care, began to examine the parchment, a silence fell over the room which was quite different from the tension that had earlier surrounded the auction.

Mr. Rosenfeld read aloud:

Confessio Petri

Thus were these words preserved among the brethren by the Tiber and handed down from the elders to those who came after. They were said to have come from Simon Peter in his old age and were written down by faithful hands, so that his testimony should not be lost.

I, Simon, called Peter, write this not as the first among the brethren, but as one of them.

In my younger days I believed that strength was the way. I believed that the Lord would establish His kingdom among men as earthly kings establish their kingdoms. I believed that the strong must lead the weak, and that the chosen must stand above the rest.

But I was wrong.

For I saw Him led away without resistance. I saw Him suffer without calling upon armies. I saw Him die among criminals. And when fear came upon me, I denied Him.

Therefore, I know now that the Lord does not build His kingdom upon the strength of men, but upon their willingness to serve.

When we walked with Him, He set no throne among us. When we ate with Him, He gave none of us dominion over the others. And when we asked

Him who was greatest among us, He set a child in our midst and taught us what we did not yet understand.
I was slow to understand this. And even now, after many years, I understand it only in part.
For man loves power. He loves honour. He loves titles and the high places. He loves to be seen and remembered by others. But the kingdom of God grows best where man forgets himself and turns his eyes toward the Lord.
Therefore, I say to every congregation and to every man who is given responsibility among the brethren:
Let no man exalt himself above his brothers. Let no man seek the highest place. Let no man believe that he stands between God and the others.
For the Lord alone is Lord.
We others are only servants.
When men gather around one strong man, division arises. When men gather around God, fellowship arises. Therefore, the congregations must be led by those who serve best, not by those who rule best.
I do not say this because I myself am without fault. On the contrary, I say it because I know my faults better than most.
I have spoken too quickly.
I have judged too quickly.
I have been afraid when I should have been brave.
I have desired honour when I should have sought humility.
I have desired certainty when I should have trusted in the Lord.
And each time I was led back to the same truth: that the greatest among us must be the least, that he who wishes to lead must first learn to serve, and that no man may make himself greater than the truth he serves.
If these words are preserved after my death, then let them not be used to exalt me. Let them not be made the foundation of men's pride or power.
For I am only Simon.
I was a fisherman from Galilee.
And the Lord had no need of a prince.
He had need of witnesses.
May peace be with all those who seek Him in humility, and may they never forget that no earthly power endures, but that service to God and neighbour

remains.
Amen.

When Rosenfeld had at last finished reading, something occurred which surprised me more than anything else that evening.

No one attempted to comment upon or interpret what we had just heard.

A remarkable silence descended over the company. It was not the awkward silence which arises when people do not know what to say, but the more reflective silence which sometimes follows something that has proved to be quite different from what was expected.

I had imagined another reaction in advance. After all that, men had done to lay hands upon the document, one might easily have expected disappointment, perhaps even irritation. Many would undoubtedly have hoped for hidden secrets, lost doctrines, or revelations of such a character that they might alter the course of history or challenge the Church's own account.

But the document contained none of that.

While these thoughts passed through my mind, I let my gaze move through the room. The others seemed occupied with reflections of their own. At last, my eyes fell upon the empty chair where Nathaniel Ashcroft had sat only a few minutes earlier.

I remember that a faint smile then crossed my face.

For it seemed to me one of history's more elegant ironies.

So many people had fought for the ownership of this document. Fortunes had been put at stake. Intrigues had been woven. Friendships had been tested, and enmities created. Yet the central message of the text was precisely that no man should make himself greater than the truth he serves.

Perhaps that was why the document was worth Saint Peter's Confession

It reminded men of something which, it seems, they must rediscover in every generation.

Throughout history men have sought power, influence, and recognition. They have built institutions, gathered fortunes, and fought for positions, often in the belief that strength and control were the goal in themselves. But Peter's words pointed in another direction. They reminded us that power without humility sooner or later loses its meaning, and that leadership which does not spring from the will to serve others easily comes to concern the one who leads rather than those who are led.

Perhaps that was precisely why the text made so strange an impression upon me that evening. Not because it told us something new, but because it expressed a truth which most men already know, and which is nevertheless so difficult to live by. The greatest truths are often not those that are hidden, but those that lie openly before us and which we choose, again and again, to overlook.

It seems to me one of history's small ironies, Watson, that so many people fought for ownership of a document whose message was precisely that man never owns anything but his responsibility.

Aftermath

What later became of the other actors in this affair I can only partly relate.

Moreau chose to remain in New York. He had built up connections, art-dealing networks, and opportunities there which it would have been foolish to abandon. I even believe that, for the first time in several years, he looked upon the future with optimism. Whether he achieved the success he hoped for, I do not know with certainty, but no one deserved it more than he.

Camille Ardent also remained in the city.

She enjoyed considerable success upon the stage, and although I doubt that New York ever fully understood her, the city nevertheless seemed to enjoy her company. She possessed a rare gift. She could make people think without their realising it. Many artists attempt to instruct their audience. Camille preferred to let them discover things for themselves.

I wished her every happiness.

Rosenfeld escaped with a fright and with a copy of the document. I imagine that he continued his quiet work among books, manuscripts,

and old papers. If anyone deserved such an ending, it was he. His role had never been to own history, but to preserve it.

The Kesslers proved worthy victors. Their decision first to exhibit the document and later to hand it over to the Church seemed to me both sensible and generous. What further became of them, I do not know. People of that kind usually continue their passage through the world without leaving many traces of themselves, apart from the collections and institutions they build around them.

As for Nathaniel Ashcroft, it was never my intention to destroy him. I doubt, in any case, that it would have been possible. Men such as he seldom fall as the result of a single event, however dramatic it may appear to those who witness it. His empire still stood when I left New York. His buildings still towered above the streets of the city, his companies continued their work, and his influence had scarcely diminished. The world around him seemed, in the main, unchanged.

And yet I do not believe that the evening in the warehouse was without significance. Not because it altered his position in society, but perhaps because, for a brief moment, it altered his position in his own mind. I doubt that Nathaniel Ashcroft changed as a man. Men of his type rarely do. They have become what they are precisely because they possess a remarkable ability to hold fast to their own story of the world. But I believe nevertheless that he remembered that evening. I believe he remembered the feeling of finding himself, for the first time in a very long while, in a game in which he did not make the rules, and where the outcome could not be secured through preparation, influence, or strength. Perhaps it was an unpleasant experience. Perhaps it was merely an irritation. But I doubt that he wholly forgot it.

With regard to Sebastian Moran, I must admit, Watson, that New York changed my view of him more than I had expected.

When I first began this journey, I regarded him quite simply as a criminal. That was not, in itself, an unreasonable assessment. He remained a murderer. He remained dangerous. He remained a man who could, without any great pangs of conscience, bring others to ruin if it served his

purpose. None of this changed during our passage through Paris, Rome, and New York.

But gradually it dawned upon me that these descriptions were not sufficient. They explained his actions, but not his driving force.

I had long believed that money was his true object. It was not. Naturally he valued it. He was far too realistic to pretend otherwise. But money was only one of the pieces upon the board. What truly occupied him was something far stranger.

It was the game itself. It was the hunt.

Not necessarily the hunt for a man or a document, but the hunt for that moment when strong wills meet and test one another. He seemed to be driven by the tension that arises when the outcome is still unknown, and when no one can know in advance who will remain as victor.

The document had been important to him, but perhaps not as important as the people it attracted. Perhaps that was why, in the end, he turned the auction into a performance and the buyers into participants in an experiment which only he himself fully understood.

As for myself, I left New York a few days later. The city had given me much to think about, but I felt no desire to remain. Nor did my journey lead me immediately home to Baker Street. There were other traces to follow and other matters which required my attention.

But that story, my dear Watson, must wait for another time.

Your devoted,
Sherlock Holmes

Watson's Closing Remarks

The fire in the grate had burned low by the time I laid the final letter aside.

For some minutes I remained seated without moving. Outside, London lay dark and silent beneath the night, while only the faint crackle of the embers disturbed the stillness of the room. Upon the desk before me lay the letters, now arranged and read through, as though, after so many years of silence, they had at last been permitted to tell their story.

I had often missed Holmes.

It was not something I was accustomed to admitting, either to others or to myself. So much of our lives had been spent in motion—in danger, in argument, in discovery, and in that peculiar restless clarity which always seemed to accompany him—that the feeling of loss had long struggled to find its proper form. Yet on that evening, as the fire settled lower before me, I felt it more distinctly than I had in many years.

It was not merely the absence of the man himself that I felt, but the absence of the way in which the world changed when he looked upon it.

To most people, an event is simply an event. A theft. A letter. A journey. The face of a stranger glimpsed in a crowd. To Holmes, nothing was ever quite so simple. He perceived connections where others saw only coincidence, and he found the human being behind an action even when the action itself seemed determined to conceal its author completely.

Yet it was not his brilliance that occupied my thoughts most strongly that evening.

It was his solitude.

These letters had carried him through Paris, Rome, across the ocean, and into the bustling streets of New York; and although he had encountered both allies and adversaries along the way, I had more than once sensed that familiar note between the lines—a suggestion that he carried his burden alone because he knew no other way to bear it.

I wish I had been there.

Not because I flatter myself that I could have altered the course of events in any significant way. Holmes rarely required my assistance in the practical sense in which other men require help. Yet there is a companionship which consists not in solving problems, and a friendship which demands no explanations. There are moments when it is enough that another person stands beside you and looks down the same dark road ahead.

Perhaps he knew that. Perhaps that was why he wrote. Not merely to recount events, but to allow me to accompany him, nonetheless.

I gathered the letters into a neat stack and rested my hand upon them for a moment. The paper felt light and dry beneath my fingers, yet to

me it seemed to carry the weight of the entire long journey. Not merely the pursuit of the document, nor the encounters with Moran, nor the strange affair in New York, but something more personal—a trace of my friend preserved in his own hand.

At length I rose and crossed to the fireplace. The flames had nearly surrendered, yet beneath the ashes the fire still glowed.

I stood there for a moment, watching it.

Then I placed another piece of wood upon the embers.

Epilogue

Dear Reader,

Thank you for accompanying Sherlock Holmes on this journey.

When I first began writing *The Secret Letters*, I set out to explore one of the most fascinating gaps in the Holmes canon: the years following his presumed death at the Reichenbach Falls. It is a period about which Watson knew very little and during which Holmes moved through a world of shadows, secrecy, and hidden dangers.

Across these four novels, we have followed him from Europe to America, through conspiracies, forgotten histories, secret societies, lost documents, and dangerous adversaries. We have met old friends, unexpected allies, and formidable enemies. We have also seen a different side of Holmes — not the consulting detective of Baker Street, but a solitary traveler moving through a world where he could trust very few people and where his own survival often depended upon remaining unseen.

Yet one of the most intriguing aspects of this period is that, even now, much of it remains unwritten.

When these events come to an end, several years still remain before Holmes finally returns to London and steps once more into Watson's life. What happened during those years? Which investigations occupied him? What dangers did he encounter? Which allies did he gain, and which enemies continued to pursue him?

Perhaps those questions will someday lead to further stories.

For now, however, *The Secret Letters* has reached its conclusion.

If you have enjoyed these adventures, you may also wish to explore my other Sherlock Holmes stories. In *The Animal Cases*, Holmes and Wat-

son are reunited in a series of more traditional investigations from their later years together. These mysteries are often quieter in tone, involving curious animals, unusual clues, and the human stories hidden behind them, while remaining firmly rooted in the world of classic Sherlock Holmes.

Whatever your next destination may be, I am grateful that you chose to spend some time in mine.

Thank you for reading.

Warm regards,
Alistair Croft