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The new laws have been a Godsend for me. I was pretty much on my uppers, with the pile I built up in financial services – the perfect field for a man such as I, modest of talent and outrageous in expenditure – wiped out by the carnage Brexit wrought. Now, there is new opportunity. We have three hundred crimes on the books that carry a capital sentence under our new and wondrous Bloody Code. *Hanging is too good for them*, people used to say. Well, not any more. Today, it's *exactly* good enough. Steal a five pound bag of sugar from the local store and see what happens. Thieves are swinging by the dozen. And a decent citizen who turns one of those scoundrels in earns a cool £15,000 a time.

The tabloid leader writers love it. Social media is abuzz. The TikTok video of a felon being informed on has become high art. The crime figures haven't changed, not yet anyway, but that was never the point. Wrongdoers, the bogus, dishonest and corrupt are seen to be punished, and if someone's transgressions are of a more white collared hue, there is usually a friend who can help.

The opportunity, of course, is *not* to inform, but to create *leverage*. A man condemned to death is liable to do the rashest things against those who send him down. We all recall the affair of Blueskin Blake and I am of no rush to have another shiv sunk in my flesh. No, all one need do is find a member of a disreputable gang with an incriminating whisper out against him, lean on that man to compromise two more of his flock, and use them to find a fourth who knows enough to hang the first fellow on Tyburn Tree. *Et voila*, the gang has a new master and none dare act against him lest their neck be stretched before the week is out.

Thus aided by the criminal fraternity, I have set up the Lost Property Office. We advertise in all the national media – the *Daily Mail* receives plenty of our coin – letting it be known that items stolen may be retrieved in exchange for the payment of a fee. As luck would have it, that fee might only be a third of the real value, saving the owner a healthy slice of change.

So what if the item of value was filched to order by one of my gangs?

The owner comes back to the Office two days later, a window slides open and their property is theirs once more. Celebrations! Really, everyone ends up happy. And if a member of the gang is found with an item that ought legally not be in their possession, then a word in the right ear, £15,000 in my pocketbook and Tyburn bounces merry again.

Such is the Lost Property Office, the great retail innovation of our times, endorsed by His Majesty and gratefully patronised by the sparkling denizens of our social elite, those people who know not how to respond when the seedier elements of the realm choose to dispossess them of their hard-stolen wealth.

But wait, good companion, someone is at my door. Tarry a while and we will speak again when they are done.

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Now here is a turn up. A clever fellow came by. He made his mint building crypto exchange tools too smart for you and I to understand. JW, he said to me, I am in a bind. And you are the solace I need. He has been deprived of his BMW SUV, he explained, and, with it, two iPhones, one of which contains pictures which he would prefer the world never to see. Embarrassment can be a powerful emotion, and doubly so in his case for reasons that modesty prevents me from relating. Of the car, he cares little, but the phone, that he must have. For his chattel back, he can offer political favour that I would scarce have thought possible. Such is the joy of Westminster today. Gone is the pretence it is there to help the little person and promote our public good. It is once more a place where treading down the right corridor can bring power and patronage beyond imagination. And today I am in the perfect corridor.

The good news is that he knows who took his private possessions and the gang is not one of mine. Albanians, they be. I have been watching them awhile, pondering if I should look for an understanding or a *misunderstanding* with them. Now my hand is drawn.

I shall put Dixon and his men on it. I know where the items are stored. The simple issue is persuasion about their return.

#

I should tell you a little about Dixon. Bermondsey born and bred. National Front back in his headier days and I am sure if you got him to roll his sleeves and trouser legs up all the way, you might find a Swastika tattoo in a dark recess. But he has moved with the times. Bermondsey is altogether a nicer place today, packed with designers, fintech entrepreneurs, socially conscious investment managers and cafes purveying the finest Peruvian coffee beans that man or beast could ever want for. My own tastes in hot beverages are more simply met, but it takes all sorts, I suppose.

Now Dixon – always a physically imposing figure, if turned somewhat to fat

these days – has closely cropped greying hair, a Rolex flashily on his wrist and wears understated suits from Issy Miyake – the fellow really has changed – and waits to let Muslim schoolchildren cross the road on their way home as he cruises around the manor in his S-class Mercedes.

His gang, though, are still the muscular outfit they ever were. Bulging t-shirts, protein shakes in hand, a quip always ready in their throats, a jack-knife handy in a back pocket and a shooter close by for when it's needed. Harry Fireblood. Crook Fingered Jake. Ben Budge. Nimming Ned. And all the young lads whose names I have never learnt. To a soul, not who you would like to meet in a dark alley as you wended homewards after a relaxing and carefree evening's entertainment, a few cups of wine to the good.

I don't ask too many questions about their Wild West antics – I am a discreet chap and it really is better *not* to know what goes on in these freewheeling days we live in – but when they go to work, the job gets done.

Yes, Dixon has a habit of success. He is a man of his world. If he says he will undertake a thing, the emphasis is on the employment he provides the *undertaker* with. The other team rarely wants to come back for a second bout.

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While Dixon and his ruffians act, always the sorts to obtain the swiftest, most *effective* results, Jeevons has been playing it slow. That is his style. So it is that balance and harmony is observed in the universe.

He is wearing one of his cotton jackets today, a little bit lived in, but its navy colour persists and keeps it looking smart. Sometimes he strays to a shirt jacket, which is not one of the modern fashions I warm to. I acknowledge that it works for him. His grey hair is long now and comfortably pushed back on his head. His eyes glitter. I will not comment on his footwear, as he makes questionable choices which pain my heart. If you bumped into him at Kensal Rise post office you would feel reassured by him, mayhap taking him for a long lost friend you went to school with or the parent of one of your younger friends. He carries himself well for his age.

Jeevons has been working on a nice little mark. One of the jolly things about Britain today is that – after Margaret Thatcher laid waste to the nation’s factories and our petulant retreat from the warm European coalition wrecked a once mighty financial services industry, necessitating my own change of career – we take a pragmatic view about other people’s money. If you are wealthy enough, you are welcome in London. Come one, come all, that is our motto, excepting the poor of course, for whom a workhouse awaits in a barbarous land far from England’s fair shores. Russian oligarchs who steal and cheat brazen enough to make a Robber Baron blush, step right up. Gulf state royalty who think a solid gold toilet is an Object of Use, join the party. Asian cryptocurrency entrepreneurs, our world, your oyster.

What Jeevons has been surveilling for eleven months now is the bijou *pied-à-terre* of Isabel Kukanova dos Santos, which is tucked away behind the Albert Hall and a snip at £21m. Naturally, it isn’t registered in her name. A dozen holding companies on fly-blown Caribbean isles have cleansed the owner’s identity, but we know what we know. It does help to have a friendly face in the Office of

Financial Sanctions Implementation who is willing to share a nugget of truth over lunch at Wiltons, I will concede.

Now, I know what you're thinking. You've never heard of Isabel Kukanova dos Santos. When I tell you she's Angolan, you'll reckon I've gone potty. Everyone in Angola is poorer than a nanty narker who hasn't cadged a farthing since Shrove Tuesday, right? Well, kind of. Most people in Angola *are* stony broke. Life is tough there, tougher than you could imagine. But there's the *others*. And our Isabel is one of them.

Her father, José Eduardo, was a Marxist-Leninist resistance fighter in 1975. Weren't we all back then? Once the Portuguese had been sent packing, off home where they belonged, he moved into government and in 1979 used his charms to become President. For 20 years he was happy to get a fat cheque in the post every year from Moscow and invade a neighbouring country when life got dull. Then some young spark discovered that Angola has more oil than Norway or Oman and it all looked a bit different. José Eduardo, ever the quick study, knew which side his bread was buttered. And knew he liked a *lot* of butter. By the time he died, handing the presidency on to his daughter as any good father might, he was worth up north of £3 billion, according to those who would know. Marxism-Leninism certainly pays better than it used to.

So that's why Jeevons has had his peepers on a quiet house in SW7 for the best part of a year. And he's done more than that. People like Isabel KdS get their security in from Praesidium Defense, a global firm who say they have the best in-house protection systems a nabob could wish for. Only they are wrong to think that. One of my firms, Gertham Security, a nice family-run business dating back to Queen Victoria's day, is better. On a cold, dark night, Jeevons got the lads from Gertham to slip into the house and make a few *amendments* to the alarm system. From that day on, the contraption would blast away every few weeks at such inconvenient times. Praesidium had no idea what was wrong and Isabel's man in town couldn't get through a night in bed with his mistress without a horn that would drown out a Mack truck going off.

So Gertham, the real experts, were asked to take a look.

Well, they sorted the problem out quick sharp and sent a juicy invoice to the grateful Angolans. One of Jeevons' men padded in with them and had a look in

the house safe. These rich Maccaronis get so pleased with their electronic devices that they don't put a decent strong box in half the time. Inside it, our man discovered six diamond necklaces that would each set you back a glowing seven figures in the Cartier shop, even if you bought them Duty Free, and companions made of emeralds and sapphires.

Three weeks later when, as luck would have it, some kindly soul had switched off the burglar alarm, security sensors, laser tripwires, internal camera system and self-sealing doors on the room that had the safe in, Jeevons went back at 4am and lugged the jewellery home.

I took him straight out for a celebratory pint of stout, as you might have done yourself. It was a lovely day for Guinness, I told him.

I was right.

When the absence came to light, it took Isabel about five minutes to file a lawsuit against Praesidium and her insurance company took it from there. By the time Praesidium settled, she got considerably more brass than the jewels were actually worth. See, crime does pay.

Her factotum also came along to the Lost Property Office and asked if we might assist. Our role is to comfort those in distress, as the fellow knew. We put the word out on the street, whispered in the right ears, looked in a few of the darkest corners and, lo, three days' later he was back, collecting a velvet bag bursting with goodness. A crypto payment for four million of King Charles' finest banknotes had cleared into our account. We were in plump fig, IKdS was cook-a-hoop and all the world basked in sunshine.

Maybe a multi-national company worth more than IBM had its nose out of joint, but frankly, who cares about a thing such as that?

§

I realise that I have yet to tell about the Office itself, where so many profitable transactions are settled. An omission on my part, humble apologies. The place is indecently smart, swanky even. Honestly, it surprises me how good it looks when I walk through the door and I paid for the whole caboodle, so know just how much the fitters charged to lay it all out just the splendid way it is. But, padded bills aside, the wonderful *stanza nobile* that our guests enter our happy world through is really nothing to do with me.

Perkins rules the front of house.

And I have to give him credit.

The man has an eye for a clean aesthetic line.

The floors and window casements are stripped back oak and Scots pine, all set against walls painted a satisfyingly indeterminate shade between Prussian blue and taupe. To frame the space, Perkins had built great racked shelving units. They might have come from a magnificent old cheese shop I went to in Glamorgan once for all I know, or formed the timbers of an eighteenth century man o' war. In place of the cheeses – or cannons, take your pick – are first editions of Henry Fielding, Nikolai Gogol, Francisco de Quevedo, Thomas Pynchon, Alain-René Lesage, Jonathan Swift, Jorge Ibargüengoitia, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Daniel Defoe and Amos Tutuola, all worn, well-read editions yet in perfect fiddle, and not forgetting Mark Twain, Voltaire and Cervantes who lurk there as well. I don't know who the literary guru was when we styled the place, but kudos to the fellow. Taste *and* a wry tip of the hat to the trade we conduct. My kind of chap.

In amongst the books are grand ammonite fossils, an antique ostrich egg, a nautilus shell you'd have to see to believe, fragments of a meteorite that might have landed on this planet a billion years ago and those quirky papier-mâché animals that tribal peoples in Mexico make. *Alebrijes*, Perkins calls them, which sounds like tapas to me, but he says otherwise. And centrepiece of the display, a

vast wheel of *Parmigiano Reggiano* that is aged and young, all at the same time. Fronting all that was a perfectly mis-matched selection of cosy seating in pastel shades of turquoise, cerise, mustard and watercress. It is practically impossible to stay on your weary old feet once you had tried the accommodating upholstery out. Settle in, my dear, and let us do the talking.

If I still wore a hat, I would take it off to the designers and Perkins, even knowing how much the shebang cost. Frankly, you can't beat quality. And our punters know that.

The slick style doesn't just make the clients feel at ease. It's worth money too. I thought Perkins was joking when he said we should invite the jolly hockey sticks crowd from the *FT*'s ludicrously luxurious glossy supplement, *How To Spend It*, to write us up as a Cult Shop. But invite he did, and they loved every splendid inch of our retail footage and, more to the point, helped a raft of potential clients of the very highest calibre discover a place they were only too delighted to come hobnob in.

Now we have a *gratis* espresso machine and a New Zealand barista who makes drinks of which I have never heard and which put a smile of outrageous proportions on the faces of those curious proto-clients who come to soak up our desirable ambiance, even before a shocking crime has befallen them.

As I say, the store front couldn't be better for business.

My own hidey-hole is behind the wondrous salon that Perkins has created, accessed through a door that looks like a bookcase, for the great convenience of those who pass the test of lucre – filthy or otherwise, we pride ourselves on being wealth agnostics – and who have an interesting problem to solve.

The Office itself is located in St James's Square.

I know what you're thinking. Surely the right thing would have been to park it in a beautified grimy street in Soho, awash with those warm old London vibes that pump beneath the glistening carapace of our quirky enterprise? But the clients live in St James's, Belgravia, Kensington and Chelsea, and we want to make their lives simpler, for an appropriately extortionate fee, of course. Plus, with the right connections – which I have – and a little cashola – also not a problem – parking can be had down our way. Try finding that in Soho. The outsize limo has to loiter somewhere, its chauffeur puffing on his vape and

chatting wax polish finishes to his nearest driver neighbour, while we chin away indoors making the most lucrative of arrangements.

As to those who come, believing deep in their hearts that a problem shared is a problem halved, even if the bill may change their view when they finally receive it, you'd recognise a few and raise your eyebrows at others. There are footballers with fifty houses scattered across the SW3 postcode, a racehorse in the stables and an unwise dalliance that is about to come home to roost. The former strongman dictator of Kyrgyzstan who has more blood on his hands than your high street butcher and so much *plata* that being worth your weight in gold would make you look cheap beside him. The third wealthiest Emir in the UAE stops by often – always troubled by the lawsuit his cousin has taken out alleging that actually, according to current IFRS regulations, *he* is actually the third wealthiest. I've never met a chap with a greater facility for getting snared in scams and scrapes, which is all to the good for the firm. There's the man who invented the no suck vacuum cleaner and perhaps left a few of his friends off the royalty cheques when the revenues started rolling in. The bauxite queen of Chile. Naturally, we have our fair share of aristocrats who were here to greet the Norman invaders way back in 1066 and somehow stayed rich afterwards. You might call them Brits, but truthfully they are Anglo-Saxons or Jutes or Danes or something I have never heard of, and with sweeping expanses of England's green and pleasant land secure under their boot, they frankly don't care what anyone else deigns to describe them as. They're here, privilege oozes through their veins and that's enough for them. And then there are the corrupt politicians of every hue – the Green Party excepted at present, but we are working on them – who are always good for news, patronage and truly world class disaster-making.

Yes, we get the lot.

The Establishment. The faces. Those people who really run the country you and I live in. The bread and butter fare of my humble business affair.

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The BMW deed is done. Dixon's crew have the plunder and those saucy pictures – the *kompromat* – are stored where only I can get them. I and their rightful owner, that is. And his ignorance of the duplicate set shall alarm him none.

Now I've seen what he is so keen to keep discreet, I wonder anew about the man. I suppose the material could create an uncomfortable level of awkwardness if seen by the wrong eyes, but enough to go to the lengths that Dixon's rolling, brawling, babbling mob have just done? I'm not so sure. I may need to explore this fellow's ... *hinterland* more.

Something dark resides within.

Back to the action, it would have filled a season's scheduling for UFC and got higher ratings if you *could* broadcast such X-rated footage. It was effective. Brutal, non-negotiable and definitive. Let's leave it at that. Suffice to say that Dixon left a number of sore heads behind him – he brought a few back too – and a couple of strangers to our land who were once quick may now be dead.

Such is life.

The wheel it turns.

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Jeevons meanwhile has a new job.

This one is Russian and he has been badgering me about it for so long that I grew tired of saying no. The mark seems to be an accountant for one of the oligarchs, the smart kind who do their jobs quietly and when Boris Berezovsky turns up dead or Mikhail Khodorkovsky finds himself in a Siberian prison, the accountant discovers he has an overflowing set of bank accounts in Geneva and is a man set free. Honestly, some of these tales about the boy from Ulyanovsk or Tver who done good would make you weep.

One of Jeevons' beetlers has a nice angle by which he thinks those Geneva bank accounts could open up and add a little revenue to the UK's faltering GDP, arriving by way of our Office, naturally. The young thruster is a patriot. I like

that. And his scheme has a rather fetching subtly to it.

The thing is, as I keep telling Jeevons, with the Russians, you never know if it's an honest crook you're turning over or a well-placed man in the SVR or GRU who likes nothing better than combining espionage with free enterprise. The latter I am happy to give a wide berth to. Novichok I do *not* need in my life.

But does Jeevons' listen?

I may need to sit him down for a proper talk one of these days.

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An underestimation may have occurred. The Albanians, it transpires, have brothers and they have friends. Dixon and his merry band have been called upon. Those who survived are in St Thomas' Hospital. Ned will nimbly no more. No transfusion will revive Harry Fireblood. I fear I must make contact with a certain dependable soul in our justice administration. The four strong of Dixon's crew who still feel a pulse shall be reported for crimes committed, including Dixon himself, my bank shall be sixty of the best bonnier and Tyburn's bough will flex once more.

You may call me unsentimental, heartless even.

But life is cheap these days. And when a dog has done its miles, the old legs not working right any more, a pair of sad eyes all that remain, the kind act is a swift and merciful one.

So a noble band of rovers shuttered their doors, making the great transition – in true Viking style – from colourful characters to legend.

They will live long and fond in the memory.

I have been thinking about shoes lately. Time was when a rigid sole and a couple of blocks of wood were enough to keep a dignified foot out of the indeterminate dreck that lines our streets. Nowadays, a City banker with a neat bonus burning a hole in his well-tailored pocket walks into John Lobb and arranges for fine pieces of leather to be attached to a hand-crafted insole and create the perfect vessel in which said banker's feet can glide effortlessly through life. Not everyone can do the same, not by a long chalk.

It's the truest kind of fact, you can tell a lot about people from their shoes.

Take my last visitor.

His story had a ring of truth about it. But the kind of ring you'd find around a bath tub back in the old days when the water had sat there for eight hours straight, going colder than Harvey Weinstein's heart, and people didn't wash as often as they ought to. A ring of truth *adjacency*, perhaps, rather than the solid gold stuff itself.

Maybe his friends in Antwerp *had* been deprived of a quantity of diamonds they were ill-disposed to lose, and maybe those diamonds *were* in London. If they were, they would pass through a leaky portal in our nation's porous Border Force soon enough. Blighty isn't likely to be their terminal destination, not when the fabulously rich denizens of the sub-continent and the Gulf still feel such a deep attachment to sparklers. And besides, a diamond dealer is always going to have a keener sense of where purloined goods might go than my humble network of collaborators are likely to do.

No, something isn't right with this bird's song.

And the giveaway? Not the story, if I'm frank. That could easily be stand-up.

No, it was his shoes. One glance under the table and I was unsettled. A diamond syndicate man like that with a pair of shoes he might have got from Marks & Spencer – not wishing any ill on the underwear supplier of choice and sometime titillation to the nation's middle classes – it just doesn't hold water. On

the contrary, it makes my heckles rise.

Shoes are a sacred item in this world of ours.

The fellow should have shown more cobbling good sense.

I shall set Crabtree to investigate just who my visitor has been. He will find out soon enough why this ill-shod trickster is darkening my door.

So, my clients do have names. I just prefer not to use them unless it's absolutely necessary. The whole building is swept for bugs twice daily, but in days like ours you never can be quite sure who may be listening. Walls may not have ears. Thieves, diddlers, murderers, drop coves, chalkers and all manner of other rogue, on the contrary, do have them and they like to have exercise of the most profitable kind.

The fellow with the BMW and two iPhones – one troublesome, the other a useful way to post on Instagram and keep in touch with his delightful mother back home – is called Raghavendra Bhatt. Mr RP Bhatt to you. Raghu to me. He grew up in Mysuru, as he tells me it's called now. I always thought it was Mysore. That said, it's the delight of our world today that nothing sits still. Everything is so amenable to change.

And where there's change, there's *arbitrage*.

Which translated into plain English means a nice slice of money jingling in my pocket whenever someone has need of the very specialised services I provide.

Borrowing his brother's ageing Nokia smartphone and taking advantage of lax IP protocols at a nearby police station, Raghu began completing an online course in software programming at the tender age of eight. The course was run from one of the Big Ten Universities in America's formerly well-endowed research system. The lady who set the course up – herself an immigrant who had grown up in far away Romania – was startled by his test scores and astounded to discover that he was not just a callow youth, but that he had yet to reach double figures in age.

From that point, he never looked back. State college with a letter less of endorsement and more of pre-destination supporting him, a charitable grant from a kindly Quaker couple in Hartford, Connecticut and one day he waltzed through the doors of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the history of the future welcomed him as one of its authors. A few familial ties brought him

back to the Mother Country, as it were, and here he now resides, with his diverse businesses making a very nice contribution to HM Treasury's coffers each year. On behalf of my country, I'd like to thank him for brightening our shores.

Today, however, he has pause to look over his shoulder for the first time in many a year and consider quite exactly where he has got to in life. He also has reason to look downwards, at his left hand. On his last visit, that hand looked very much like yours or mine. Now the little finger has a big white bandage on it and, strictly speaking, only on half of it. From digital whizz kid, he has become *digitally* curtailed. Impaired in the finger department, if you will. Some unfriendly soul has ascertained quite how much loot Raghu has made out of the cryptocurrency bubble and explained to him, with a degree of conviction, that they would like a piece of it. To show that they are serious, and to speed negotiations, they lopped the end of his finger off before returning him to his well-appointed office.

Lest you worry unduly, he has the missing portion of finger, all refrigerated and safe, and one of the best surgeons money can buy is lined up to reunite it with him later this very day. But he recognises that he has a business problem and is in need of help.

He sits across the desk from me, in my office, a sly smile on his face.

You have a reputation, if I may say so, as a thief taker, he begins.

A reputation is useful thing to have, says I. That doesn't mean it's true. And a thief taker, that would be a risky occupation for a chap to have. I received a shiv between the ribs once from a shameless villain who was correctly getting his just deserts and whom attached himself to the idea that I was a cause of his demise. I have no more ribs I wish to spare. I could show you the scar now were it not for common decency. But no, I repeat, to be a thief taker, that would be a dangerous berth in society.

Still, you know people, hear things, says he. He waves his undamaged hand around at my humble premises. Your business is based on intelligence about wrongdoing. I simply wonder if your ears might hear more than those of others.

I hear plenty, I say, most of it unfit for human consumption and none of it for onward sharing.

That I understand. But I have encountered a personage I should happily

never have laid eyes on and by whom I am now ... compromised. I gather, having met the lady face to face and seen her skill with a sharp blade, that she is known as La Marseillaise.

La Marseillaise, like the song?

Yes, just like the song. The national anthem of France across the water. But perhaps she lacks the jaunty enthusiasm which usually accompanies the song when you hear it bellowed out at a rugby match or in a tear-joking wartime movie. He pauses for a moment, remembering a recent event who would have been glad to avoid, no doubt. Should you happen to hear anything about this character, he continues, who liberates honest citizens from their rights – he lifts his reduced hand up and wiggles his demi-digit – I should be very grateful if you would whisper in my direction.

Then let us say that I should be pleased to earn your gratitude and if an opportunity to do so arises, I will gladly oblige. May I ask if my colleague, Mr Crabtree, might liaise with someone on your team who might furnish particulars of what has befallen you?

You can indeed. In fact, I would welcome it. I shall make the necessary introductions.

I thank you for that.

The thing is, he says, leaning forward across my desk, I feel that my first encounter with this lady, La Marseillaise, was by way of a *getting-to-know-you*. That what she wants is in fact more than the money she tried to extort.

A tithe on the lucre you have piled up in your accounts would satisfy most regular folk.

Indeed it would. And that bothers me.

I imagine it does.

This is a game of chess and I have seen the opening gambit. Her stratagem I shall have to divine.

That will take time and endeavour, I fear.

Yes, we agree there.

And while you divine, are you concerned by security, given the clear and present nature of the danger before you? It may be that I can assist.

No, I was surprised the one time. My colleagues are properly attuned today.

I am aware of my situation and security is now not my principal concern.

Understood, says I. Your enhanced safety pleases me. For now, I shall wish you good thoughts for bodily restitution and we will talk again when you are improved. I anticipate happier conversations to come.

As do I.

With that he rose, swept through my tastefully upholstered door and was gone.

I have a sweet spot for Janeway. I admit it. She is putting her daughter Cassandra through a smart ladies' college and in a few years she will be a well-paid accountant, without a whiff of the things her mother did to get her there. Izzy, the youngest, is on a good track too, only taking the wild child route to get there. She is the brightest of the bunch, I reckon, and try as Janeway may to steer her towards a lucrative career in the law, she'll end up running a perfume business that upstages Estée Lauder or something equally startling by the time she is done.

Janeway, or Mary if you insist on me using first names and being more in touch with my inner self, is the Next Cab on the Rank, now that Dixon has scrambled his hash with terminal effect. That doesn't mean that she and her motley assemblage are there slugging it out, toe to toe against the next group of hammer-wielding upstarts that the Great Wen thrusts in our direction. No, I am not Frank Warren, looking for the next piece of meat to go at the head of a fight night poster. What it means is that when a juicy job comes up, Janeway and friends have first dibs on it. They are liable to take a more thoughtful approach as to how to get it done. That doesn't preclude the kind of violence that Dixon – let's be straight about it, recently demised as the man is – lived and dreamed for. It just means that there may be more than one way to skin a cat.

Yes, there is no end of innovation and industry in the illicit realms on our shores.

Britain's Got Criminal Talent.

We really do.

So Janeway has top billing and here she is, telling me about a job with *potentiality*.

§

Through a spy – a special one – useful facts come to me about the man who makes it all tick for the Albanian gang, Gentian. You might call him the adjutant of the operation. He proposes and the muscle disposes.

I have spoken with the man. We dined together at Saint Jacques. He has a liking for French cuisine, it turns out, and why shouldn't he? There are few challenges that *magret d'oie rôti*, *rognons de veau* and *joues de boeuf braisées* can't sort out between them, especially if you add a nice vintage bottle of Puligny-Montrachet *vin rouge* to the mix.

He and I understand each other. Information has been shared on others in his orbit, helping my hand, and matters have been settled.

There is peace. Honour has been served. And I have traded Dixon's home grown bruise for something altogether darker and more intriguing.

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Jeevons had a visit too. They explained politely, in British public school accents, that his surveillance wasn't welcome. As a little act of good faith, the Russians blew up his Bentley, in Jermyn Street in broad daylight – I ask you – and explained that next time he'd be inside the motor. Jeevons got the message. This one wasn't just a felon on the make.

He's now off in the Maldives for a month to settle his nerves down. His ticker has been a problem lately to be fair, and cocktails with umbrellas in can have such restorative effect, so I can see his point. His next project is going to be a nice ditzy old widow.

Give the fellow his due, he's earned a break. This has been his best year yet. And maybe next time he'll listen to what his wisest counsellor has to say.

Margus is from Estonia. I say to him, I've been there. Disney castle, Christmas markets with *Glühwein* – or whatever name the locals choose to give it – nice little spiced gingerbread cookies and snow swirling under the decorative lights.

That's Estonia, right?

He says that is Tallinn, all dressed up for the tourists to come and play in, as if there were some tasteful footage left over when they finished shooting *In Bruges* with all those atmospheric night scenes and they wanted you to think there was a real place like that. Tallinn got the role and does it awful well.

No, he goes on. Estonia is a different place to the fun park I have been to.

He grew up in a tower block on the outskirts of Tartu, in the Annelinn district. From the time he was eleven, the family always had a Go Bag ready, with clothes, passports, money (krona *and* Euro) and a precious heirloom or two, ready for the day the Russians poured across the border again proclaiming that it was Estonia's lucky day and everyone was back in dear old *Rossiya* again. With the bag in the corner, they ate potatoes, pork and cabbage and watched Swedish gameshows through the long winter evenings. At least that was better than Finnish television.

Margus, unsurprising given this grimy back story, left the country and made his way to our own humble Metropolis as soon as he was able. Now, here he has developed many skills of use to a variegated enterprise like my own. Principal amongst them is the ways and means of financial crypto crime. I have been asking him about how Raghu may be distressed and what exactly this dirty French puzzle, La Marseillaise, may be after.

He talks me through the great crypto heists of our times. They are more numerous than I had grasped. He picks a handful out to demonstrate the *how* of it. There was Mt Gox in Japan, back a ways in 2014, when \$450m went astray after the exchange's blockchain was compromised. Margus talks about Coincheck in 2018, \$530m up in a puff of smoke because of poor wallet security. (I keep my

wallet firmly in my back trouser pocket and woe betide any lithe fingers that try to get in and exfiltrate it.) And then the Ronin Network in 2022, with \$625m purloined by North Korean agents. I must admit I don't mind an honest crook coming in with a scheme to get rich quick, but the stooges of Kim Jung-un, he with the worst haircut on the planet since Peter Stringfellow passed on, bless his soul, taking a fellow's wealth, that gives me a pause and a discomfort too. Right down here, next to my heart.

But, on consideration, Margus thinks Raghu will be wise to the problems all those unfortunate pioneers encountered. The fellow is a class act, as best we can tell. And where the crypto cowboys have been plucked by the skilled gunsels, Raghu is already part of London's still great – and I hold in abeyance my grievance about how the Great Act of Self-Harm laid my own finances low – financial services industry. His crypto exchange is for the Big Boys. It makes money disappear in one place and re-appear somewhere else, with enough paperwork to satisfy our bureaucratic authorities that proper process has been observed. He is like a magician, only one paid a percentage of sums bigger than you could imagine if you went out and thought of numbers you would struggle to say out loud, so long were they. Raghu's product is a high end service for the blue chip customer.

We agree that Margus will talk to a few liminal characters he knows and figure out what they *would* do if they were angling to bring Raghu down.

It's a thought that leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I mean, we are honestly looking to help the chap. And here we are wargaming the best way to wreck his glorious endeavour.

But set a thief to catch a thief.

There's a maxim I can live by.

You might call Janeway data-driven. Not that she is a quant, like you'd find in a high frequency trading firm, lost in spreadsheets so complicated that your computer doesn't know what to do with them and writing algorithms that really do trade one ten thousandth of a second faster than the next guy. No, I mean she follows the evidence. Starts with information and sees if it leads to money.

She loved the Panama Papers, the Swiss Leaks, the Bahamas Leaks and all the other *exposés* showing where obscenely rich people stash their wealth. Her gratitude to the fearless journalists at *The Guardian*, *New York Times* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung* knows no bounds. Those folk really stuck their necks out and the results were outstanding. She owes them more than a pint. A slap-up dinner at a top West End eatery wouldn't be out of place.

After a good deal of wild goose chasing, she has got the Paradise Papers down to three really tasty marks. People you wouldn't notice in the street. Living in ordinary houses. All of whom have *expropriated* such large sums of money from their home countries that their lives must be lived on tenterhooks. At any time, someone with a grudge and a machete may track them down, ready to take vengeance for all the shocking stuff they did to get their loot. For people of this ilk, exchanges like Raghu's are gravy. With a little notice, they can use the crypto networks to move funds hither and thither, all without troubling the taxman unduly and getting snared up in those organisations designed to stop racketeering and such like things.

Still, working the crypto exchanges takes time and the transactions are best done face to face, in a room with no wifi connection to the outside world. If the guy you bobbed in the next village turns up with said machete, you have to leave that second and take enough wherewithal with you to start a new life abroad in the luxury these folk have accustomed themselves to. That means jewellery. Small enough to transport. Innocuous enough to get through the scanners at Heathrow with a dozy guard who is waiting for his shift to end. Ordinary looking

pieces, locked up ready in a safe, that are nothing but diamonds and rubies and pearls having a joyful convention together.

Portable wealth of the most liberatable kind.

As I say, Janeway is down to three. The ones she is certain have a ten figure stash hidden somewhere in their Muswell Hill suburban paradise. One from Brasil, another from Equatorial Guinea and the last from Malaysia. If you ask me, the Malaysian is the real crook of the bunch.

But it's her job.

And she's working out which one to start with. You have to acknowledge it, Dixon's ways belong in the past. Mary Janeway, she's all about the future.

§

One, two, buckle my shoe. Or in the case of my last visitor, my Edward Green loafers, that would set you back well north of a thousand of God's own currency should you ever wish to buy footwear made in Heaven.

He is a foreign gentleman, though with his correct choice of footwear and a Thom Sweeney suit on his back, he's a Brit in a functional sense. But while he can dress the dress, he doesn't know our history. He asks about the Bloody Code, why we have it and how it came to be? Sensible questions, I say, and not as easily answered as you might think.

But I will try.

It began with the Bubble.

Now, they called it the Bubble because a long time back, in 1720 in fact, the Grand Old Days, we had the South Sea Bubble here. That was a big speculation that everyone got bilious about. So much money went into it that you would have struggled to borrow a shilling to buy a nice big leg of beef, should you have wanted to. Everyone put everything they had in. All in, like they were playing poker on television. And why not? The South Sea Company had a monopoly on all our fine nation's trade with South America. There was money in that business. All the slaves you could extract from Africa, shipped across the oceans to the Caribbean and beyond, then sweated until they dropped working on a plantation that was so profitable that it might as well have grown gold. That was their lucrative enterprise and every Man Jack in this city wanted a piece of it.

The problem then was that the people on the inside did what they thought they were entitled to, in other words a spot of *insider trading*, bribing the politicians of the day to turn a blind eye and then, having salted all the good money out of the firm, turning to the public at large and saying there was nothing left in the bank. When that came to light, the world and his dog wished to exit and the whole caboodle went down. No-one who was worth a penny came out of it with a clink in his purse as he strolled the streets.

Now, we are lucky to live in times when businessmen don't deceive their loyal investors and politicians are no longer amenable to a juicy bribe. Well, perhaps in times when they do those things, but there are rules about who gets stuck with the bill. Usually, the taxpayer.

But I digress.

We still have bubbles and three years ago we had one and good.

The British Supremacy Bubble, as the boosters said at the time.

Or, the Bubble and Squeak as the rest of us called it afterwards.

This one was a little crypto, a bit Elon Musk – we're all used to see his grand fireworks going up like the biggest Guy Fawkes Night you could imagine, leaving debris all over nice clean beaches in Mexico, and no-one getting closer to Mars than Icarus did – those degenerative AI companies, a bit tariffs and a lot having some of the most ignorant people on the planet at the heart of government in a country big enough to cause us all a problem. Honestly, if you'd put Piltown Man in charge, he'd have done it better. The boosters pretended it was Brexit finally doing its magical and long-promised twist when the bubble went into overdrive. After it bust, those fellows were nowhere to be seen, unless you happen to spend your days walking along the beach in Mustique, St Barts, Capri or Tetiaroa, which I personally do not.

The crash was so big in this trusting archipelago that British think of as home that Law and Order broke down. Genuinely, when a million jobs are piss-burned in six months, and the Government has maxed its credit card out trying desperately to cling to power, something has to give. That something was the peace of mind to be able to stroll to the local William Hill without getting bashed on the head with a piece of lead piping. Or indeed sit quietly in your own castle home, watching *Love Island* and not have burglars putting the patio window through with a breeze block and greeting you with a seven inch hunting knife. Wives and children do not enjoy such things.

Something Had to Be Done.

And the clown newspapers who had raged so hard for Brexit latched on to an old solution, namely reducing the number of felons roaming the streets by one each time a crime was committed. Trusty old Tyburn Tree started hanging them and the public loved it. There were downsides. Ratings for *Love Island* crashed

through the floor for one thing. And the innocent individual mistaken for an extraordinary miscreant choked about the injustice as he spun and twisted on the end of a rope. But that was just *friction* in the system. The gutter newspapers loved it, and soon there were twenty capital crimes and before anyone knew what was happening, three hundred were on the statutes.

If it was someone else's country, you would laugh and not stop for a long time.

But being British, we shrugged our shoulders, organised learned seminars were about how *wrong* it all was, started some pretty fiery Substacks and we learnt to love the good old-fashioned entertainment of the death of one who richly deserves it. If a person tried to reverse the policy now, I dread to think what would occur.

Insurrection, or worse.

I would worry for King Charles III sitting in his shiny palace with so much discontent outside his gleaming gates.

All this I explained to my foreign acquaintance, who sat in his Edward Green loafers looking a little less comfortable and more than somewhat puzzled.

In the end, he says, you will do what works for you. In my country, he continues, we used to kill people for protesting if they were younger than eighteen, for drug trafficking, apostasy (I admit I had to look up what that was on my phone after he left), adultery and witchcraft, but we got rid of all those primitive laws. Our path has been away from the brutal. Yours has been to embrace it. Owning your values, that is the path of purity. The man says he respects it.

He may have a point.

I am still not sure.

I am out, waiting for Crabtree, and have decided to kill two birds with one stone, having a nice lunch together at Franco's and he updating me on what he has learnt about Raghu's vexatious situation.

I do not mind that he is late, as I have a very pleasant table in the front window, a bottle of Barolo is open and being enjoyed, and all the world is passing by on Jermyn Street outside. A minor royal steps out of Emma Willis' shop, a bulging bundle under his arm and a smile on his face. He gets into a yellow Maserati driven by a lady who would put Amita Suman or Florence Pugh in the shadows. Two Japanese tourists stop and take a selfie that is so complex in its construction that I cannot follow what they are doing, but it makes them unconscionably happy. Delirious almost. They film their own reactions to the selfie and post them online too.

I sip my wine.

It is a thing of beauty, made by people with kindness in their hearts. The world is a good place to be, and certainly better than the alternative.

Crabtree arrives, out of breath somewhat, a little flustered like, and sits down. He is all apology for his tardiness. I say not to worry and pour him some Barolo. He takes a taste and calms in plain sight. This is not wine to be taken lightly.

How are your investigations going, I ask.

Well, he says. But first I have news.

Then share it, says I. I am all ears. A good tale will brighten my luncheon.

There has been fighting, Crabtree reports. I listen. Raghu's security detachment and the soldiers of La Marseillaise have come to blows, out Hoxton way.

Not far from where Raghu runs his profitable enterprise, I note.

Not far indeed. The first account says that twenty-six fellows are dead. The police are more than somewhat surprised at the scale of the activity.

They and I both.

Yes, the police, it would be fair to say, are in shock and still processing the untrammelled violence. But twenty-six fatalities is what they are saying.

This is not London, friend. It is more close to a bad day in Port-au-Prince. (That used to be such a lovely place, I reflect, back in the days *before*.) It is like a blood feud being played out in Grozny. And Raghu himself, he is unscathed and well, I ask.

He is fine, Crabtree says. Alarmed, but no scathing has occurred. Indeed this morning he was positively buoyant, as the operation to restore his severed finger was a complete success.

I imagine his mood is darker now.

Aye.

But twenty-six dead, I say. You are sure? It is the sort of exchange Dixon and the Albanians would have indulged in. And look where they are now.

These Marseillaise are not like other folk, he relates. They do things differently there. Normal rules don't apply. Did you ever see the cinema film *BAC Nord*? I shake my head. Suffice to say that where the Marseille gangs rule, the police don't go. Ever.

We have areas like that, I say, here in London.

Like Marseille? An ambiguous smile dances on Crabtree's lips. No, we don't. We *really* don't.

Just then, the *maître d'* comes, a lovely man, and talks about the specials. I am pleased to follow his advice. Crabtree has more conservative tastes. He chooses the Parma ham and then beef tartar.

Out the window, a couple walk along the street, merrier than sandboys. He is black, she south Asian, and they are arm-in-arm, walking in step. He carries a voluptuous bag from Paxton & Whitfield, the cheese emporium, in his hand and she has been shopping at Margaret Howell and done well. Laden with bags, she is. Their smiles are so untroubled and light-hearted that they might float off into the sky.

I sip my wine. It is still good.

It puts me in mind of the poem, I say.

What does?

He takes a tot of wine in too, and his mood lifts for the shortest moment.

These events out in Hoxton. This visitation of Baluchistan tribal warfare on our shores.

I gaze out on the joyous throng passing down Jermyn Street.

Do not go gentle into that good night, I say. *But rage, rage against the dying of the light*. I look Crabtree in the eye. These new people in our world, they rage, rage more than one might have thought reasonable.

He looks back at me, silent like.

Our starters arrive.

So enough with the bloody news, I say. What have you learnt about Raghu's disposition?

Ah, that is a simpler tale, he replies. A fork loaded with ham and *bufala* mozzarella makes its way to his gizzard. Down it goes. I am getting some clarity there, he goes on.

He proceeds to tell me that Raghu's security team have been concerned about the activities around eight of their client accounts these last few days. All are Russian, well situated in the current gory regime in Moscow, so rich that they could buy a Gulf emirate and have change left over, and so well hidden that HM Government hasn't the slightest notion that they are all forbidden from operating in our nation by the sanctions levied against Mother Russia, the great warmonger.

Obviously, I say, they have money beyond imagination, but something else is in play.

Yes, it is. Raghu's chief of security thinks that if the accounts of all eight could be compromised, and they *persuaded* by the prospect of losing billions of the dollars that are so close to their hearts, then between them they could force a change of leadership in Moscow.

A new Tsar be appointed?

Indeed. They would have the means to do it. Intelligence. Military. Civil policing. Transportation. Governmental administration. All the cards a gambler would want and more besides. The old Tsar's body would be dumped in a ditch out back of Red Square.

These are high stakes, indeed, I say.

That they are. Whoever took over, if one of the eight, wouldn't trust the others and would surely eliminate them, one by one. Unless they have an escape route.

The calculus is enormous and complex, I say. Isaac Newton himself couldn't have worked it out.

Aye, but he would have ascertained that there was gravity in the situation and conservation of energy.

Meaning?

That one of the eight is the protagonist and intends to do down the others.

I finish my *calamari fritti*, drink a little more of the wine.

Right here, now, we live in a world perfected, I continue. No need unmet. Happiness sprinkled over the denizens of St James's like so much confetti. But outside, in the wider world, change is afoot. These be strange times.

I take another mouthful of the Barolo on board. Warmth spreads deep inside me.

The best of times, says I aloud to Crabtree, and the worst of times. That old bearded chump was right.

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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