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HOUSE *of* THIEVES

a novel

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**CHARLES
BELFOURE**

HOUSE
of
THIEVES

a novel

**CHARLES
BELFOURE**



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Also by Charles Belfoure

The Paris Architect

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For Chris.

1

It was a perfect day to rob a bank.

The rain outside hammered the sidewalks like a monsoon. The river of delivery wagons, double-decker omnibuses, and carriages of all description that usually flowed in an unending torrent along West Thirty-Third Street had been reduced to a trickle. In place of the rush of pedestrians along the sidewalk, a few men with umbrellas hurried by the plate glass windows of the Manhattan Merchants & Trust Bank. Customers would hold off coming to the bank until the downpour stopped—and that wasn't going to happen for hours.

All of which meant fewer witnesses.

Stick Gleason looked down the barrel of his Colt Navy revolver at the people lying facedown on the shiny, white marble floor, then glanced over at Sam Potter, who was standing guard inside the massive oak-and-glass double doors of the front entrance. Potter nodded: things were going well. Though they both wore white muslin masks that hid their faces, Gleason knew Potter was smiling at him.

The woman on the floor in front of him started to whimper, reminding him of a hunting dog he'd once owned. When the dog wanted out of his crate, he'd give a high-pitched whine until Gleason couldn't stand the noise any longer and freed him. Gleason could only see the top of the woman's scarlet-colored hat, which had a slanted brim with a sort of high mound on top, like a beehive covered with yellow and green cloth flowers. Must have been a society lady.

"Keep quiet, ma'am. We'll be through in just a few minutes," Gleason said in a soothing tone, tapping the top of her hat with the barrel of his Colt. She shut up immediately.

He was getting anxious himself. "Come on, Red. How much longer?"

"Goddamn you, I told you never to rush me," Bannon said angrily, the words muffled by his muslin mask. He continued to pour the nitroglycerin drop by drop from the small glass vial into the joints of the bank vault's hinges. Beads of sweat slipped down his forehead, sliding over his eyebrows and into his eyes, making him blink uncontrollably. He kept wiping them away with his left hand.

It was dead quiet in the bank. Then Gleason heard a faint noise building quickly toward a screech, like a boiling teakettle about to blow.

“Listen, woman, I told you...”

An ear-piercing scream exploded out of the society lady’s mouth. Bannon flinched—and Stick watched in horror as the glass vial slipped from his fingers and fell to the marble.

The blast was like a white-hot fireball of a meteorite, streaking from the vault room to the front windows of the bank, incinerating everything in its path. Bannon was vaporized in a millisecond, along with Gleason, the society lady, four bank tellers, two customers, and the entire wood-and-marble interior of the banking hall. Potter was propelled like a rocket into West Thirty-Third Street and through a storefront window directly south across the road.

A delivery driver and his bay horse lay dead and bloody amid the wreckage of a dray wagon. A cast-iron electric light pole was bent parallel to the street. Windows and storefronts on the south side of West Thirty-Third were blown in too, leaving black holes that seemed to gape out at the newly silent street in astonishment.

• • •

James T. Kent, standing under an umbrella on the flat roof of the eight-story Duckworth Building directly across from Manhattan Merchants & Trust, watched as a great plume of black smoke billowed up from West Thirty-Third Street, drifting past him and blending into the gray sky. The street below was a mass of confusion, with people running toward the building from all directions. The clanging of fire wagons could be heard in the distance. *There won’t be any need for them*, Kent thought. The blast had sucked the oxygen out of the space, which meant no fire.

From his vantage point, the men on the street looked like ants scurrying in and out of the blasted opening of the bank. *They’ll find no bodies*, he thought. *Only tiny pieces of human flesh and bone*.

“Poor bastards,” said Ben Culver, a short, stout, broad-shouldered man.

“It was the nitro,” Kent said, not a shred of emotion in his voice. “Handling it is like trying to hold quicksilver—almost impossible. But still better than using dynamite. Remember Maritime National? The cash, negotiable bonds, and stock certificates, all burned to ashes by the blast. It took Red hours to sweat out that nitro from a dozen sticks of dynamite. He said blowing the vault would be the easy part.”

“We’ll never replace Bannon, Mr. Kent.”

“No, we won’t. Red was the best cracksman in New York.” Kent took a cigar out of his gold case with his black-gloved hand and tapped it idly against his palm.

“These vaults are too damn hard to blow in the daytime, Mr. Kent. Bank jobs are just too risky anyhow. The Company has to...”

“Diversify?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“I agree,” said Kent with a smile. “What do you suggest?”

Kent was a tall, thin man in his early forties, with graying hair and a commanding presence. He always wore a black frock coat with matching waistcoat and pearl-gray trousers, all ordered from Henry Poole & Co., the best tailor in London. He had schooled Culver, whose previous wardrobe could charitably be described as loud, in dress. A gentleman, he’d said, must always be so well dressed that his clothes are never observed at all.

Culver valued this advice almost as much as his cut from their jobs. These days, he was as elegantly clothed as his employer, though the juxtaposition of his battered and meaty red face with his fine, tailored outfits frequently struck one as very odd.

“The army’s stopped guarding President Grant’s grave in Riverside Park,” he said, brimming over with his excitement at offering a new business proposition. “They just have a night watchman. They haven’t started building the real tomb over it either, so we could snatch the body and hold it for ransom. Like they did with A. T. Stewart back in ’78. His widow forked over twenty thousand dollars for the body. For a department store king! Think how much we’d get for a United States president.”

“I can find only two things wrong with your plan,” Kent said amiably. “First, I served proudly under Grant in the war. And second...it’s incredibly stupid.”

He smiled and patted Culver on the shoulder, as if to lessen the sting of his words. A disappointed expression twisted Culver’s face, and he looked down at his expensive, black patent leather shoes—the ones Kent had advised him to purchase. Culver wasn’t the brightest, but he was absolutely the most loyal employee of the Company, and Kent genuinely liked him.

“I know those men had families,” he said, pulling out his tan pigskin wallet and removing ten one-hundred-dollar bills. “Please divide this among them.”

“That’s very kind of you, Mr. Kent.”

Kent extracted his Gorham solid-gold pocket watch from his waistcoat and frowned. “The annual board of directors meeting for the Metropolitan Museum is at eleven. I’d best get going.”

2

“John, you should be damn proud of this boy of yours.”

John Cross turned and stared at his son, who stood next to him in the entry foyer of Delmonico’s. It was hard to believe that this was the same toddler he’d once played with on the beach at Long Branch or taken to Central Park to sail boats. George was strikingly handsome. He had inherited his mother’s dark complexion and straight black hair and was at least three inches taller than his father. The twenty-two years of his son’s life blurred together in Cross’s mind. When had his boy grown into a man?

“Thanks, Stanny. He turned out all right, I suppose.”

Stanford White, a six-footer with red hair and a thick brush of a mustache, roared with laughter. Beside him, Charles McKim, normally a very reserved fellow, also burst out laughing. White’s enthusiasm was always infectious.

Cross had met White and McKim many years ago, when they all worked for Henry Hobson Richardson as apprentice architects. Stanny and Charlie remained his closest friends, and he was particularly happy that they were there for his son’s graduation party.

“Graduating from Harvard, captain of the baseball team. Not too shabby,” said McKim. “In fact, I’m jealous. I sat on the bench when I played there.”

“Yes, congratulations, Georgie. So, are you following in the old man’s footsteps and taking up architecture?” White asked, giving Cross a wink.

“No, sir. Unfortunately, I didn’t inherit my father’s artistic talent. I’m going to be a mathematics teacher at Saint David’s this fall.”

“George has been teaching part-time for the Children’s Aid Society downtown since the winter. Then next year, after Saint David’s, full-time at Columbia graduate school. On his way to becoming a brilliant professor,” Cross said, voice full of pride.

“Not a bad place to begin your teaching career,” said McKim. “Saint David’s is the poshest school in town.”

As White nodded with approval, his face broke into a sly smile. “Ah, behold. The beautiful Helen of Troy.”

Cross’s wife, Helen, walked up to join the men. She was mesmerizing in a crimson

evening dress from Worth of Paris; a lovely pearl-and-diamond necklace set off its deep décolletage, and a pair of large diamond festoon earrings framed her high cheekbones. Few women in New York society could challenge her beauty and charm. At parties and balls, men swarmed around her like bees to honey, making Cross proud and nervous at the same time. Having a beautiful wife was a double-edged sword—Helen was the object of pride *and* possible scandal. But he knew he didn't have to worry about Stanny, whose preferences for female companionship tilted toward those below the age of fifteen.

Helen gave the group a steely look. "You gentlemen are blocking the way of Georgie's guests. Take your masculine good fellowship into the grand dining room, please. John and Georgie, you stay where you are."

White bowed, took her hand, and kissed it. "Whatever Helen of Troy commands."

Cross looked out, past the glass-front double doors of the restaurant. "Do you think she'll come?"

Helen rolled her eyes. "When she says she's going to do something," she snapped, "she always follows through. For heaven's sake, don't worry." She straightened George's white tie, brushed a bit of lint from his white silk waistcoat, and then ran her hands along the shoulders of the black cutaway tailcoat. Satisfied, she rose on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek.

"Later, I want you to be sure to talk to Granny—and Mary Morse."

"Oh, Mother."

For the next twenty minutes, the trio greeted more guests. Finally, Cross nodded toward the doorway and said in a low voice, "Here she is."

On Fifth Avenue, directly in front of Delmonico's, a shiny black brougham pulled by two sleek chestnut horses in gold-trimmed harness drew to a stop. The driver and attendant were dressed in gold and navy-blue livery and black top hats. The attendant hopped down from the box and opened the passenger door.

In the dusk of the warm July evening, a short, rather stout woman in a beautiful black silk brocade evening gown stepped out, holding on to the white-gloved hand of the attendant. She stepped onto the sidewalk into the circle of bright light cast by the new electric streetlights, which had recently replaced their much dimmer gaslight predecessors. The glow of the light reflected in tiny sunbursts off her tiara of diamond garlands and her dog-collar necklace of hundreds of tiny diamonds on a band of deep purple satin. As she rearranged her black lace shawl over her shoulders, a crowd gathered on the sidewalk to gawk at her.

Cross watched as she marched with regal ease and confidence through the glass doors of the restaurant. She moved as if she owned Delmonico's. And in a way, she

did.

Caroline Astor was the undisputed queen—or despot, some felt—of New York society. She alone determined who belonged and who did not. If a person failed to meet her approval, he or she was condemned to social death.

In 1886, New York society had only two parts: old and new. The old, known as the Knickerbockers, were the descendants of the original Dutch founders of New Amsterdam, nicknamed for the knee-length breeches they once wore and headed by families with names like Schuyler, Schermerhorn, Van Cortlandt, and Van Rensselaer. There was also an old English flank of founders led by the Livingstons and the Phillipses. The rigid Knickerbocker social code demanded absolute propriety and strict conformity. They religiously obeyed this code, even dwelling in identical brownstones the color of chocolate sauce, driven by the paralyzing fear that they would be thought different and would thus become the subject of gossip.

Then there were the new, a *nouveau riche* class made up of millionaires who had made their fortune from businesses such as railroads, steel, or horse cars. Dirty, undignified pursuits, the Knickerbockers sniffed. The new displayed their wealth with outrageous extravagance, building luxurious mansions and amassing yachts, jewels, and clothing—luxuries universally condemned as vulgar by the old moneyed class. But undaunted, these parvenus came from all over America to New York City, where they stormed the walls of the Knickerbocker aristocracy.

Caroline Astor was a proud Schermerhorn, but she straddled the world of old and new by marrying the grandson of John Jacob Astor, a German-born fur trader who had become America's richest man. Helen Cross was a distant, relatively poor member of the Schermerhorn clan. John Cross, a distant and equally poor Livingston relative, helped cement the Knickerbocker connection. "Aunt" Caroline liked them both and watched over them like a mother hen, and they had been taken under her wing and safely ensconced in "new" New York society. She even insisted on paying for Helen's wardrobe and jewelry. They lived modestly, however, in a wide three-story brownstone at the corner of Madison Avenue and East Thirtieth Street and had only four servants. Cross likened his lifestyle to the architectural scale he used in his drawings; he lived at one hundredth the full-scale life of the Astors.

But to her credit, Caroline had opened doors to the advantages and privileges of society, to him and especially to George and John's other two children, Julia and Charlie. Thanks to her connections, Cross's architectural practice prospered. But Cross knew that if there were the tiniest hint of scandal about anyone in his family, she'd cut them off in a second and would have nothing to do with them again. These were the ironclad rules of their world. One malicious whisper could annihilate a family's

reputation and banish them from society forever. Completely shunned—people who were once your closest friends would never talk to you again, even to your children.

“Aunt Caroline, thank you so much for coming,” said Helen, meeting her at the door, arms outstretched. Helen was one of the very few people Aunt Caroline ever publicly hugged. She gloried in the fact that such an incredibly beautiful woman was a Schermerhorn.

“Tonight I must attend a tiresome charity performance at the Academy of Music,” said Aunt Caroline, “but I knew I had to stop by to see Georgie. Where is that handsome boy of yours?”

“Aunt Caroline,” said George, stepping forward, taking her hand with both of his and kissing her cheek.

“Here’s a little something for my class of ’86 man,” she said, handing him a small box wrapped in silver paper. George unwrapped the present in front of her, knowing she would want to see his reaction.

Others had made their way to the foyer, eager to curry favor with Mrs. Astor. White, one of her architects, hovered about with Charles Crist Delmonico, the grandnephew of the founder who controlled the restaurant dynasty and had made it the best restaurant in the city.

Nestled in a wad of cotton was a magnificent gold pocket watch and chain. George pulled it out, eyes wide in wonder. Instead of the usual incised decoration, the tiniest of diamonds and rubies formed a sinuous, vine-like design on the watch’s cover and sides. The inside cover featured a similar raised motif in a vortex swirl, with a large diamond at the center. The back of the watch was engraved: “To George, Harvard Class of 1886, From Aunt Caroline.” Helen’s and John’s eyes met; their first reaction was not pride but fear. *What if George lost such a beautiful gift?*

Beside them, White let out a whistle. “That’s incredible.”

“You know that workmanship, Mr. White. I had Louis Comfort Tiffany design it specifically for Georgie,” Mrs. Astor said.

White had just completed a commission for the Tiffany family, constructing a huge mansion of golden-brown brick at the corner of Madison Avenue and Seventy-Second Street.

“This is a work of art. Thank you so much.” George bent to hug his aunt, who bear-hugged him right back.

“It’s a pleasure, my dear boy. And now I must be off.” Before anyone could bid her good-bye, Aunt Caroline turned, the train of her gown sweeping around, and marched triumphantly back to her carriage. Dozens of people were waiting to get a look at her and, more specifically, to see what she was wearing, for Caroline Astor also dictated

New York fashion. If she decided to wear a Chinese coolie's straw hat to dinner, Fifth Avenue's shops would be flooded with them the next day.

As John and Helen stood at the front door, waving good-bye, Charles Crist Delmonico said, beaming with delight, "Ladies and gentlemen, dinner is served in the grand dining room."

• • •

Only Caroline Astor could have persuaded Charles Eliot, president of Harvard University, to stop by to say a few words at George's graduation party. Eliot had been traveling through New York from Boston the day after commencement and couldn't say no, especially to such an immensely rich donor. Besides, George had been both an academic and athletic star at Harvard, so Eliot was pleased to visit.

So that he might leave in time to catch his train to Washington, Eliot spoke briefly before the meal started. He rose to his feet at the end of the long dinner table, a slight and unassuming man in his fifties, with a long nose and bushy sideburns, the leader of America's greatest university. The cacophony of the celebration was instantly silenced.

"Ladies and gentlemen, George Cross exemplifies the kind of man Harvard produces. During my tenure at the university, I've seen a change in the Harvard man's character. His sense of personal honor and self-respect has increased. Drunkenness has decreased. It still troubles me to see vices born of luxury and self-indulgence on the rise. But this doesn't touch George Cross. Not only does George exemplify academic brilliance, but he's also a man of great character and determination—as he showed last year at the Polo Grounds, when he drove in the winning run in the ninth inning against Yale."

The dining room erupted into wild cheering and applause, and George shyly rose and waved to his admirers. President Eliot shook his hand, bowed to the crowd, and left the room, a signal that the eating and drinking could begin. Because Helen and many other ladies were present—and because Caroline Astor had paid for the dinner—it was not a wild male bacchanal that such an occasion might have prompted, but rather a luxurious society event. More than one hundred diners sat at a table that stretched the length of the room. Down its center ran a deep trough bordered by high banks of beautiful summer flowers. In the trough swam three white swans, which glided up and down its length, oblivious to the diners on either side. The eight courses, served on silver, included consommé à l'Impériale, Maryland terrapin soup, red snapper, canvasback duck, fillet of beef, cold asparagus vinaigrette, a dish of sherbet to cleanse the palate, and then a saddle of mutton, truffled capon, and fresh vegetables of all kinds, followed by desserts and candies. Claret, Burgundies, Madeira, and

champagne flowed into the guests' glasses as from a spigot; in the background, an eight-piece musical ensemble played on and on, light sounds to enliven but not disrupt the burble of conversation.

The party came to an end at about 2:00 a.m., when Cross found his son saying good-bye to Stanford White, always the very last to leave.

"George, your mother and I are going now," Cross said, clapping his son on the shoulder. "It was a wonderful party. Please be in touch in a few days."

"Thank you so much for tonight, Father. I'll never forget it." George clasped his father's hand, smiling.

"Helluva party, Georgie old boy," Stanny shouted as he left the restaurant with John and Helen. "The night's still young, and I know a place on East Forty-Fifth that's just beginning to heat up."

"We're not going anywhere with that blackguard," Helen hissed into Cross's ear as they made their way to a carriage on Fifth Avenue.

Cross just sighed. He had long since given up trying to change his wife's stubborn opinion of Stanford White's sybaritic character, especially his taste in women.

• • •

His guests gone, George walked downstairs to the restaurant's open-air street café, settled into one of the carved wooden chairs, and lit a cigarette. After almost six hours in the dining room, the night air felt cool and refreshing. Fifth Avenue was deserted, and the pure silence soothed George after the hours of unending noise. He leaned back and closed his eyes, savoring the triumphant evening.

"Beautiful night, isn't it, George?"

The voice came from directly behind him. George smiled and swiveled around, expecting to see an admiring classmate. Then his face turned pale, and the cigarette dropped from his lips.

James T. Kent sat at a table a few yards away, dressed in elegant evening attire, smoking a cigar and sipping a glass of white wine.

"Just dropped in for a nightcap before heading home after the theater. But now that I'm here, maybe I could have a word with you. It's about a matter of some delicacy."

George rose from his seat and started toward the low wrought iron fence that enclosed the sidewalk cafe. But a short, broad-chested man stepped out of the shadows, moving to cut off his exit.

"I think you remember my business associate, Mr. Culver."

Culver smiled at George but said nothing.

"Why don't we take a little trip?" said Kent.

3

*Oh, he floats through the air
With the greatest of ease,
This daring young man
On the flying trapeze;
His actions are graceful,
All girls he does please,
My love he has purloined away...*

Kent got such pleasure out of seeing his men enjoy themselves. He hadn't realized Freddy Dugan had such a wonderful baritone voice. If he hadn't become an extortionist, the man could've made it on the stage.

Kent and ten of his employees were standing inside the new cable car power plant, currently under construction on the East Side. It was a huge brick and stone structure with tall, arched windows and a cavernous central room, where steam machinery would be installed to pull the coils of steel cables that wound and twisted beneath the city streets. Cable cars were the latest fad in New York, and the wise bet said they would soon replace the horse cars entirely. Kent saw it as a great investment. A cable car didn't have to be fed. It could work all day, and most importantly, it didn't deposit tons of shit and an ocean of piss onto the streets. When the Brooklyn Bridge had opened three years before, cable cars had been installed, and they'd been a great success.

But cable cars were still the future. The present object of his men's delight, George Cross's body, was swinging like a giant clock pendulum above the cement floor, bound and suspended upside down at the end of a thick rope whose other end was looped over a steel roof truss twenty feet above the men's heads. Culver held the end of the rope, and Tommy Flannigan pushed George's body, sending him in a wide arc. Back and forth he went. Kent's men sang and roared with laughter at each swing. Kent had never seen them have so much fun sober. When George threw up his banquet from Delmonico's, they whooped and howled.

Finally, Kent walked over to the swinging body and raised his hand, signaling for