

# THE COLLECTOR

By CHRISTOPHER LEPPEK & EMANUEL ISLER

"Come in. Come in, out of the rain."

He smiled, revealing a full array of large gleaming teeth, contrasting with a shock of snowy hair, carefully and elaborately coifed.

"You're Devin Clark, of course. I hope you're hungry."

The young man shivered as he crossed the threshold, entering the home of Adrian Constable.

They shook. The older man emitted a scent of sweetness, perhaps some strong cologne, and the house itself was redolent of old wood and the expensive wax used to preserve it.

Clark's eyes adjusted to the gloom within the rambling Capitol Hill mansion. All was dim, as if lit by candles, and the colors themselves -- on the velvet curtains, the wallpaper, the plush rugs -- were deep and antique crimsons, golds and purples.

"Come, come. Let me introduce you to my guests."

Clark followed the heavy yet surprisingly agile figure into a large parlor.

"My dear friends," Constable announced, "it's my pleasure to introduce you to Mr. Devin Clark, the new assistant curator at the art museum."

They rose as one, as strange an assembly as Clark had ever seen in one room. He exchanged smiles with Mr. and Mrs. Asher Leigh -- he the president of Denver's largest bank, she the well-known society matron whose taste for diamonds and glitterati was already known to Clark. He shook hands with Dr. Myles and Denise Remick -- he the prominent retired surgeon, she the aging one-time beauty queen. Lastly, he felt the strong grip of Ian Samuels, the newly signed outside linebacker for the Broncos, along with his date, Melissa, a youthful blonde whose curves and revealing dress did not go unnoticed by Clark.

What the hell do these people -- and me -- have in common? Clark wondered.

"I'm so delighted to have all of you with me tonight," Constable exhaled. "It's so nice that you've all come to relieve this old man's dreary existence." He giggled lightly, placing a Chesterfield into a long ivory holder and holding it between his thumb and forefinger. He drew deeply and exhaled the smoke in a neat blue stream toward the ceiling.

He's a walking stereotype, thought Clark.

Sherry was served from a crystal decanter and the guests exchanged droll repartee. They inquired of Clark's background and he replied courteously, meanwhile taking in the surroundings.

The parlor exhibited money and taste. The furniture was all velvet and wood, Queen Anne most of it, and doubtlessly vintage. The shimmering grand piano, a Steinway. The tapestry, hand-woven with vermeil thread. And upon a small pedestal of

bird's-eye maple stood a most amazing display. Clark rose to view them closely, marveling at their delicate beauty, their gems and minute painted patterns.

"Ah, an admirer of Faberge, I see," Constable said from behind, nearly startling Clark. "Oh yes, they are authentic, I assure you."

Constable reposed upon the Steinway, now directing his words to the entire assemblage. "The collection is not what I'd like it to be, I'm sad to say. Faberge eggs are most difficult to obtain; sadly, there remain certain things in the world that even money cannot buy."

The eggs before him, Clark thought, must be worth at least two million.

Soon the conversation began to dwindle and Constable detected the subtle change. He began to play the piano, effortlessly performing a Rachmaninov concerto. His skill was highly impressive, but the sight of the corpulent man -- his coifed hair, expensive dinner jacket, silken ascot -- struck Clark as comic. Although he felt highly uncomfortable in this house, with these people, he knew the prize would be well worth the price.

Constable ended the concerto with a flourish and bowed to soft applause. He rose and with a wide sweep of his arm announced that dinner was served.

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The invitation had arrived two weeks prior. At the time, Clark didn't know why he was singled out. In fact, until he spoke to Dick Jasper, the head curator, he had no idea who Adrian Constable was.

"This is a fantastic opportunity!" Jasper beamed. "We've been trying for years to get into Constable's house."

Jasper could hardly contain his excitement. Constable was the last survivor of one of Denver's oldest, most prominent families. Their money had come from silver and gold more than a century ago, and had been wisely invested since. Nobody knew how much money Constable now had at his disposal, but the sum must have been enormous. He was a recluse, seldom seen outside the confines of his ancestral dwelling. He had never pursued a profession.

His private library, ranging from enviable first editions of 19th century masters to medieval illuminated manuscripts, was an object of pure lust to many noted bibliophiles.

In a strange way, Constable also collected people, or at least dinner guests. His Saturday night dinners, held once monthly, had been going on for decades and were well known to the city's venerable society figures. It remained a mystery why certain people were invited, while others -- the most obvious prospects -- never received an invitation. Most guests were invited only once, their one visit apparently enough to satisfy Constable's eccentric curiosity. He would invite reporters on the basis of one story that intrigued him; athletes on the basis of one play that he'd watched; ballerinas on the basis of one performance. As far as anyone knew, Constable had no close friends or acquaintances.

And of course there was the art.

"It's been rumored for years that Constable owns a particular painting," Jasper said. "Its existence isn't even confirmed, but now, thanks to you, we have the opportunity to investigate."

The coveted painting was *Pike's Peak By Twilight*, allegedly painted by Albert Bierstadt during his 1866 journey to Colorado. Art historians had described the piece as one of Bierstadt's most dramatic landscapes. Its whereabouts, however, were officially listed as unknown. Rumor had it that Constable's great grandfather, the scion of the Colorado family, had actually commissioned it.

"Clark, we'd die to get our hands on that painting. It would put us on the map in a very big way."

The young curator leaned forward, already anticipating the opportunity and relishing the challenge. "What if it is there?"

Jasper smiled. In response, he produced a blank check and slipped it into Clark's pocket. "The board has already met on this. Negotiate, try to get us a deal, but you're authorized to go as high as five million."

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Dinner was exquisite, served by Constable himself with superb grace amid the gleaming silver, snowy linen and soft candlelight of his massive table.

Clark salted his meat with the heavy silver shaker. Barely legible, etched in fine tiny script, were the words "HMS Titanic." He looked again. Was it possible? Could they be dining with actual relics from the Titanic? The shakers were pristine, bearing no evidence of any watery grave. He began to speak but stopped himself. The shakers had to be counterfeit and Clark wouldn't risk embarrassing his host.

The conversation was sparse, vaguely uncomfortable, but Constable, in a strange way, kept things moving.

Constable's theme was collecting. He boasted of his own collections, explaining that he not only collected things but ideas and people. All of it was his passion.

He asked guests to tell him their passions. The banker revealed his love for money, the football player his love for physical combat. The surgeon confessed his love for saving lives.

Clark thought it odd that Constable never questioned him like the others.

At last, Constable pushed his chair away from the table and tossed his napkin onto his empty plate. "You see," he said, gesturing widely with his arms, "we're all very much alike, really. Our passions may be different, but we're all collectors."

Clark and the others followed Constable's lead into the den. Gathering on couches and loveseats, they accepted cognac.

Clark cleared his throat. "So what is your passion, Mr. Constable?" he queried. "What do you collect?"

Constable started, as if unaccustomed to being questioned so directly, but quickly composed himself. "Moi? Why I collect. . . I collect everything, of course. The rare. The precious. The gorgeous." He paused, swirling the Louis XIII in his snifter.

"And, of course, the bizarre."

"And *why* do you collect, Mr. Constable?"

Constable gazed intently into the eyes of his questioner.

"Collecting is everything, Mr. Clark. Accumulation equates with possession. And possession equals power."

Clark wanted to question his host further but sensed Constable's subtle uneasiness. Above all, he was reluctant to offend the sensibilities of the collector.

"Speaking strictly for myself, Mr. Constable, I admire your collections, at least those I've seen."

Constable glanced at the young man knowingly, as if imparting a silent secret. "But, Mr. Clark, you haven't seen everything. Please, please. Explore to your heart's content. There's much here, I assure you."

Clark rose with a friendly nod. Taking his brandy, he began a leisurely stroll through the old manse, grateful to leave the others behind.

He found himself stunned by the furniture, the books, the accessories. Their rarity and beauty was undeniable.

He finally came to Constable's private art gallery. The walls were virtually covered with original paintings, elaborately framed, individually illuminated by studio lights. Constable's tastes ranged widely, from the early Impressionists to the Hudson River School, from Barbizon to DaDa.

Over the mantle hung the Bierstadt.

It took his breath away. Characteristically huge, the canvas was unmistakably Bierstadt. Pikes Peak loomed massively just off center, illuminated by an indigo sky, the foreground a complex arrangement of trees, ponds and verdant clearings. Only Bierstadt could have captured it this way.

"Splendid, isn't it?"

Clark gasped at the unexpected voice behind him.

Constable placed another Chesterfield into his holder and leisurely lit it. "Oh, it's authentic all right, as I'm sure you've determined by now."

"It's absolutely magnificent!"

Constable exhaled casually toward the ceiling. "Yes, it's been here forever, Mr. Clark. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I am almost weary of it."

He noticed the incredulous look on Clark's face. "But I'll bet you wouldn't find it tiresome, would you?"

Clark wanted to jump right in and negotiate, but restrained himself. It would have been too direct, too blunt.

The collector put his arm warmly on the young man's shoulders. Clark flinched at the touch. The older man gazed deeply into the younger man's eyes and smiled softly. Clark thought he understood the old man's intentions and found himself suddenly uneasy. But once again he played along, fearful of losing his chance at the Bierstadt.

Perhaps detecting the discomfort of the moment, Constable removed his hand and gestured toward the door. "The others are leaving, I'm afraid. We mustn't be rude."

On the way down, Clark's mind raced. When should he make his move? What should he say? Would he be given an opening?

The farewells went like the dinner itself, formal yet somehow strange. The expression on Constable's face revealed that his own curiosity had somehow been satiated with each of them.

Clark was the last to depart. There was a moment of awkward silence as he grasped Constable's hand. Clark tried valiantly but could find no words to make his play.

Shoulders hunched, bitterly resigned to his own incompetence, he had reached the wrought iron gates when he heard his name.

He turned to regard the figure at the door.

"Come back tomorrow afternoon, say three o'clock. We have more to discuss, Mr. Clark."

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Clark drove slowly to Constable's house in a sea of falling leaves.

By daylight, Constable's neighborhood lost some of its Victorian allure. Many of the houses had been transformed into shabby apartments, ill-kempt and slightly sinister looking.

Constable's house loomed, an island of gentility amidst the squalor, nearly concealed behind high hedges and a spiked wrought iron fence.

The door opened on the first knock, revealing an impeccably dressed and groomed Constable, the trademark cigarette holder in hand.

"Come, come. I have tea waiting."

Constable helped him remove his overcoat and giggled lightly at the younger man's flinch. "Oh, my dear Mr. Clark," he said. "Don't tell me. You're nervous about being alone with an old faggot like me."

"No, not at all. I . . ."

"Please, please. Save your apologies. You have nothing to worry about, Mr. Clark. You see, I've been impotent for years."

Strangely comforted by this assurance, Clark followed his host into the parlor. They sat down to steaming cups of Earl Grey.

As Clark spooned sugar into his cup, he searched subtly for any etchings upon the spoon.

Constable detected his scrutiny. "Unlike the shakers, I'm afraid my tea set can boast no famous associations. You really didn't believe they were authentic, did you?"

Clark blushed. "I admit I had my doubts."

"Please, do trust me. The shakers were pilfered from the Titanic's galley by no less than Molly Brown, the unsinkable one herself, who was a good friend of my grandmother. Despite her millions she could never cure herself of the nasty habit of petty thievery.

"The point, Mr. Clark, is that everything I tell you is absolutely true. Everything you see is absolutely authentic. Everything you touch is real. But let's get down to business."

Clark nodded.

"The Bierstadt, of course, is also authentic." Constable eyed his guest intently. "And we both know why you're here. Tell me, how badly do you want it?"

"The museum wants it very badly, Mr. Constable. I've been given full authority to . . ."

Constable laughed. "Of course you have. But let's avoid pedestrian talk of money, shall we? As I said, I've grown rather weary of the painting. Believe me, after having gazed upon it since my infancy, I can tell you about every subtlety, every nuance, even every mistake on that canvas. Simply put, Mr. Clark, I'm bored with it."

He stifled a yawn. " So let's settle on a price."

He gazed at the ceiling as if in deep thought but then giggled mischievously.

"How about . . . one dollar? I'll take a check or currency, your choice. I could have it delivered today. Would that do?"

"Excuse me?" Clark blurted.

Constable rose and stood before the gaping curator. "I'll take that as a yes. I feel relieved, don't you? Shall we shake on it?"

Constable beamed. "Great. Now, finally, we can discuss something truly important."

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Clark followed Constable's insistent lead back upstairs. Constable approached an antique steam radiator against the wall and with a melodramatic gesture worthy of Peter Cushing released a hidden catch with a soft click. The radiator, obviously false, was connected to an entire wall panel, which slowly whooshed open, revealing a dark gaping cavity.

The gesture struck Clark both as amusing and vaguely sinister, but he resisted the temptation to comment.

"Come, come, Mr. Clark. Now the fun begins," Constable said, disappearing into darkness.

It was a circular staircase of wrought iron, traversing a narrow shaft cut from the house's stone foundation and lit by a handful of naked bulbs. It was obviously quite old, and apparently designed for only one person's width. It trembled slightly with their weight.

Constable's voice echoed up from the cavity. "My grandfather had this clever little passage built in the Twenties. It was Prohibition, of course, and he needed a place to store his bourbon and scotch."

The staircase descended all the way into the cellar, opening into an unlit space. Constable awaited Clark at the bottom.

He switched on a light. "Voila!" he boomed, sweeping his hand in a wide arc. "Welcome, Mr. Clark, to a collection that most of my guests have never seen and surely never will."

At first glance the room resembled a cluttered curio shop -- bookcases, tables, shelves and various display cases seemingly filling every available space.

"Observe, Mr. Clark," Constable said, pointing.

"A most amazing display of Victorian lacework, don't you think? It's actually a remnant of a harlot's collaret. It was owned and worn by Elizabeth Stride, the third victim of Jack the Ripper. Look closely. Do you see the stain?"

Constable moved quickly to another table. "Ah, and this!" He held up a pointed cap of bright green satin, decorated with yellow polka dots and topped with a purple ball. "A clown's cap, of course, but can you guess its owner?"

Clark shook his head.

"None other than the infamous John Wayne Gacy. How does that strike you, Mr. Clark?"

"Well, it's . . . I mean, how did . . ."

Constable held up an impatient hand. "A true collector, Mr. Clark, will go to any length to obtain the object of his passion, whatever it happens to be. To obtain my collections I've spent untold millions, I assure you, and I've done much more than that, most of which I wouldn't dare tell you. The point isn't the method or the cost. It's the acquisition, the ownership, the fulfillment of the need, the completion of the set."

In a whirlwind tour, Constable displayed many other elements of this macabre and fascinating collection: A massive iron torture device, the "iron maiden," dating back, Constable boasted, to the time of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the mastermind of the Spanish Inquisition; a Mayan mummy still within its elaborate sarcophagus, purported to be the victim of ritual sacrifice, whose heart had been ripped out and eaten; the revolver used in the assassination of President McKinley; the megaphone once belonging to the Reverend Jim Jones; the battered six-string Gibson once played, Constable claimed, by Charles Manson.

Clark shook his head. Was it possible that everything was as Constable said? And if it was, who in their right mind would gather such ghastly objects?

Constable seemed to have read his thoughts.

"You're no doubt wondering what theme connects these objects, what common thread ties them together. A true collection must have a theme, no?"

"Yes, of course. But I don't quite get it."

Constable smiled. "It's quite obvious. The theme of this exhibit, Mr. Clark, is evil. Pure and simple. These are the tools, the physical legacies, of evildoers, malefactors of every conceivable stripe. I'm very proud of these things. Sadly, I can't show them to many people. They would get, shall we say, the wrong impression."

Clark cleared his throat, mindful of saying anything that would damage his chances of obtaining the Bierstadt. "Yes, I can see that. A most impressive collection. Amazing really."

Constable emitted a stream of smoke upward. "Yes. But as they say, the best is yet to come. This room is but the visual aperitif. Come, come."

He removed padlocks and chains from a heavy but strangely small oaken door in a corner. Smiling, he slowly opened the arched doorway and stooped inside.

"No electric lights in here. It would be disrespectful."

Constable lit a sconce of candles upon the wall, and as the light came into focus, Clark gasped.

The room was bare save for a dozen stone pedestals of varying heights placed in an apparently random pattern. Atop each was a human skull.

"My God," Clark whispered, hesitating to enter.

"Oh come, dear boy, there is nothing to fear. No ghosts. No evil spirits. Just glory!"

Clark took a step forward. The smell was faint but disturbing, a mixture of molten wax, dank stone and a vague scent that might have been decay.

At first he didn't want to look, but he couldn't resist. Silently, Clark gaped at the horrific display, the candlelight casting changing shadows across the empty eye sockets and leering grins. The skulls were in varying hues, from deep brown to pale beige, all smooth and clean. Glinting, almost glowing.

"What. . .who. . ."

Constable giggled. "Permit me to introduce you to my . . . friends, my baker's dozen so to speak." Constable placed his hand gently upon one skull. "Here lies Pancho Villa, the would-be liberator of his people. And here is Vlad Tepes, better known as Vlad the Impaler or, in Hollywood, as Count Dracula himself."

He went from skull to skull, gently, almost lovingly caressing each one. "Lizzie Borden, of forty whacks fame; John Dillinger, fearsome gangster done in by the lady in red; Oscar Wilde, the greatest gay man in history; Houdini, the greatest magician and escape artist of all time, but who could not wriggle free of the Reaper's grasp; John Wilkes Booth, murderer of the American Christ; Beethoven, brilliant composer, tragic man; Cochise, most feared of the Apache chieftains; H.P. Lovecraft, weaver of nightmares; Mata Hari, beautiful, brilliant deceiver."

Constable moved to the tallest pedestal, which held the darkest of the skulls. Clark noticed that a large portion of bone was missing from the rear. The skull was entirely black, as if seared.

"And this specimen -- the most difficult acquisition of my entire career -- is that of the Führer himself."

"No, not . . ."

"Oh yes, my dear boy. It is indeed. He is as authentic as the rest. Stunning, isn't it? Almost unbelievable. Here. Touch!"

He took Clark's trembling hand and guided it to the blackened bone. Clark felt the rough, distressed surface of the thing.

"Now, how many people can claim to have stroked the head of Adolf Hitler?"

Clark jerked his hand away in revulsion. Constable laughed.

"Your feelings, Mr. Clark?"

Clark was speechless.

"I confess that I've spent a great many pleasurable hours within this very room, standing amidst history, absorbing all this power, all the blinding brilliance, which once emanated from these now empty shells."

Clark swallowed. "Power and brilliance. Is that what ties this collection together?"

"Yes, but it's more than that, my young friend, much more. Of course these people were powerful and brilliant, each in their own way. Some were good and some were evil. Some were mad. But what matters is that they all fascinate me. They compel me. I will forever obsess over their legacies. It's selfish, I admit, but isn't selfishness what collecting is really all about?"

The two men stood silent for a moment, gazing in the flickering light at the dark gathering before them.

"But you're a perceptive man, Mr. Clark. Surely you realize that I must have an agenda, in addition to my shameless penchant for showing off, of course. And perhaps the word 'addition' is of great import here."

"Yes, I see your point, Mr. Constable. You called this collection your baker's dozen. But I count only twelve."

Constable clapped his hands in delight. "Exactly! Which brings us to the business at hand."

He moved aside to reveal a lone pedestal, set unobtrusively in a corner, draped in black velvet. He lifted the object easily and placed it in the center of the cluster, directly before Clark. In the fashion of a matador, he snapped the cloth away.

"Voila!"

Clark stared silently at the empty pedestal.

"The stage is now set, Mr. Clark, awaiting the final member of the cast."

"The final member?"

"But of course. No collection achieves true greatness until its completion. Every person throughout history who has ever fascinated me is present with us today -- save one. The one who fascinates me the most."

"I see," Clark responded hesitantly.

"Do you? And just who do you think that final member might be?"

Clark struggled to come up with a name, someone worthy of sharing company with those allegedly present.

Constable shook his head. "Ah, now you disappoint me." He moved within inches of Clark's face and smiled widely.

"You're staring at him now, Mr. Clark. It's me! Yours truly! Moi!"

Clark stepped back. "You? What do you mean?"

Constable giggled again. "What I mean, Mr. Clark, is that I shall be the 13th. And you, dear boy, will help me complete my collection."

Constable gestured toward a small oaken stool. "Sit down, Mr. Clark."

His voice lost most of its feminine quality and now grew direct, authoritative.

"I want you to listen to me. Carefully. This is no joke. I'm an old man. I've seen all that I've cared to see in this world. I've done all that I care to do. Except for this final specimen, my collecting is complete. Call it melodramatic if you like. Call it insane. Call it narcissistic. I don't care. But my wish -- my ultimate desire -- is to become one with my collection. It is my obsession -- and indeed I shall have my way -- to collect . . . myself."

"I don't understand."

"Oh, I think you do. You see, I can't complete my collection without your help." Constable slapped his hand down hard on the empty pedestal. "I could kill myself, true enough, but then what? How could I join them then?"

"You don't mean . . ."

"Of course I do. The stage is set, the final member of the cast is present, and you are now the director of the play."

Clark laughed derisively in spite of himself. "You must be crazy to think that I would kill you, so you could join this . . . this madness."

"Yes, perhaps I am. But I shall have my way. Every detail has been seen to. Look."

Constable reached into his pocket and produced a legal document. "This contract formalizes the effective transfer of the Bierstadt to your museum for the grand sum of one dollar. It lacks only my signature. And that signature will only be provided upon your consummation of this arrangement."

Clark stared intently at his host. Despite the coolness of the room, beads of sweat surfaced on his brow.

"You're probably worried about the legal consequences, but I assure you that I've seen to that. In fact, I've seen to everything. When you have accomplished the necessary task, a man in a sports car on a high Mexican cliff will meet his untimely end. That man will be identified as Adrian Constable, will be certified as such and will be buried as such. When said Mr. Constable's will is read -- it's already been signed and filed -- a certain Devin Clark will be named the sole beneficiary of the decedent's entire estate -- real property, cash and assets, investments, and the collections, of course."

Constable paused to study the young man's troubled face.

"Not only will you have obtained the Bierstadt for your beloved museum, Mr. Clark, but you will be wealthy beyond your wildest dreams. Of course, eyebrows will be raised. Many will suspect you of having been the young lover of an aging queen. But considering the size of the purse, I think the price is well worth it. Agree?"

Clark shook his head. It all made sense to him now; Constable's plan had been a piece of brilliant manipulation from the start.

"No. I can't help you. I can't possibly do this."

Constable ignored his entreaties.

"There really is very little time. Everything has been synchronized with great precision. I believe it's time for the curtain to rise."

Constable removed something from the wall, an ancient looking but deadly crossbow, loaded with a single arrow. He placed it gently on Clark's lap. He set another stool some ten feet away, crossed his legs, lit a Chesterfield and exhaled.

"The device is simple enough, Mr. Clark. Simply unlatch the safety and pull the trigger. The optimal target, of course, would be right about . . ." He pointed to just left of the center of his chest.

Trembling, Clark stared directly at the weapon, its gleaming tip, the horrible tautness of the catgut string, the obvious tensile strength of the wood.

"Oh, and by the way, you'll find full instructions on my desk upstairs as to the proper and efficient disposal of my remains. Everything's there, even the recipe for the bleaching solution."

"I . . . I can't."

"Come, come, dear boy. Of course you can. Do it. Do it now!"

Constable struck a dramatic pose, as if for a formal portrait. He took a final puff, exhaled the smoke languidly and stamped it beneath his shoe.

He raised his chin slightly, swept aside his lapels and smiled.

Clark's heart pounded. He felt beads of sweat trickling down his cheeks. His stomach tightened. He stared intently, unblinking, into Constable's relaxed, luminous eyes, fully confident that he would not -- could not -- carry out this task.

Yet, as if manipulated by invisible puppet strings, his arms slowly raised the crossbow to bear. It was heavy, solid, and Clark's arms stopped only when the weapon was level with Constable's chest.

Why not aim for the ceiling, fire the damn arrow, get into the car and leave this madness behind forever?

Why not throw the weapon to the floor, tell Constable what a lunatic he is and walk away?

Why not forget the whole thing? The Bierstadt. The estate. Everything.

But Constable smiled ever wider, as if he already knew the final outcome of the young man's deliberations, the grand climax of his great drama. He briefly held up a hand and produced the legal document from his coat. He scrawled his signature upon the contract and let it fall to the cool floor. The gesture was obscenely casual, treated almost as an annoying afterthought.

Clark's hands trembled, and the crossbow gently undulated with the uncertainty of his grasp. He wiped the sweat from his brow with his left shoulder and drew in a long deep breath.

The weapon steadied at last. Constable's chair emitted a slight squeak. Clark gently exhaled the breath.

The action of releasing the trigger was surprisingly easy and effortless. The weapon delivered no kick to Clark's shoulder, and the arrow hissed softly, like a snake, as it coursed its deadly path.

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With a confident step, the slender figure descended the familiar, faintly illuminated stairs. Armed with a large feather duster, he traversed the first room and entered the second through its oaken door, extinguishing his Chesterfield as he did so.

He gently lit the wall sconces and set purposefully to work. Humming softly to himself, he dusted the skulls in order -- from tallest pedestals to lowest. He greeted each with its name -- Lizzie, Mata, Johnny, Adolf.

He paused at the thirteenth pedestal and ceased his humming. This was the whitest of the skulls. It gleamed softly in the candlelight, revealing its perfect cleanliness, its virginal newness. He lovingly dusted this final specimen, this culmination of the collection.

"Adrian."

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#### WRITERS' COMMENT ON FINAL NOTE:

We wanted the ending to be quite, but not totally, obscure. The phrase "slender" in the first sentence is the giveaway, since we described Constable several times as corpulent or heavy. So, the mysterious figure at the end is indeed Clark (albeit, rather altered in what might be called Constablesque ways). But if you think it's not obvious enough, feel free to edit in such a way as to make it more plain.

Thanks for an excellent edit.