

# A BREACH OF PROMISE

ANNE PERRY



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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**Anne Perry**



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To Ken Weir  
for his friendship

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**O**LIVER RATHBONE LEANED BACK in his chair and let out a sigh of satisfaction. He had just successfully completed a long and tedious case. He had won most substantial damages for his client over a wrongful accusation. The man's name was completely cleared and he was grateful. He had told Rathbone that he was brilliant, and Rathbone had accepted the compliment with grace and appropriate humility, brushing it aside as more a courtesy than truth. But he had worked very hard and had exercised excellent judgment. He had once again used the skills which had made him one of the finest barristers in London, if not in England.

He found himself smiling in anticipation of a most pleasant evening at Lady Hardesty's ball. Miss Annabelle Hardesty had been presented to the Queen, and had even earned an agreeable comment from Prince Albert. She was launched upon society. It was an evening in which all manner of victories might be celebrated. It would be a charming affair.

There was a knock on the door, interrupting his reverie.

"Yes?" He sat up straight. He was not expecting anyone. He had rather thought he would go home early, perhaps take a short walk in the park and enjoy the late-spring air, see the chestnuts coming into bloom.

The door opened and Simms, his chief clerk, looked in.

"What is it?" Rathbone asked with a frown.

"A young gentleman to see you, Sir Oliver," Simms replied very seriously. "He has no appointment, but seems extremely worried." His brow puckered with concern and he looked at Rathbone intently. "He's quite a young gentleman, sir, and although he's doing his best to hide it, I think he is more than a little afraid."

"Then I suppose you had better ask him to come in," Rathbone conceded, more from his regard for Simms than conviction that the young man's difficulty was one he could solve.

"Thank you, sir." Simms bowed very slightly and withdrew.

The moment after, the door swung wide again and the young man stood in the entrance. He was, as Simms had said, deeply troubled. He was not tall—perhaps an inch less than Rathbone himself—although his slender build and the squareness of his shoulders gave him an extra appearance of height. He had very fair skin and fine, regular features. Strength was given to his face by

the width of his jaw and the level, unflinching gaze with which he met Rathbone's eyes. It was difficult to place his age, as it can be with those of a very fair complexion, but he could not have been far on either side of thirty

Rathbone rose to his feet.

"Good afternoon, sir. Come in, and tell me in what way I may be of service to you."

"Good afternoon, Sir Oliver." The young man closed the door behind him and advanced towards the chair in front of Rathbone's desk. He was breathing very steadily, as if it were a deliberate effort, and when he was closer it was possible to see that his shoulders were tense, his body almost rigid.

"My name is Killian Melville," he began slowly, watching Rathbone's face. "I am an architect." He said it with great meaning; his light voice almost caressed the word. He hesitated, still staring at Rathbone. "I am afraid that I am about to be sued for breach of promise."

"Promise to do what?" Rathbone asked, although he was all but certain he knew. That particular phrase held one meaning above all others.

Melville swallowed. "To marry Miss Zillah Lambert, the daughter of my patron, Mr. Barton Lambert." He obviously found difficulty even in saying the words. There was a kind of despair in his face.

"Please sit down, Mr. Melville." Rathbone indicated the chair opposite him. "By all means tell me the details, but I think it is quite possible I may be unable to help you." Already his instinctive liking for the young man was waning. He had little sympathy for people who flirted and made promises they did not intend to keep, or who sought to improve their social and financial situations by using the affections of a woman whose position might be an advantage to them. They deserved the blame and the misfortune which followed.

Melville sat down, but the bleakness of his expression made it apparent he had heard the disapproval in Rathbone's voice and understood it only too well.

"I had no intention of hurting Miss Lambert," he began awkwardly. "Of causing injury either to her feelings or to her reputation...."

"Is her reputation in question?" Rathbone asked rather coolly.

Melville flushed, a wave of color rising up his fair cheeks.

"No it is not, not in the way you mean!" he said hotly. "But if a ... if a man breaks off an engagement to marry—or seems to—then people will raise questions as to the lady's morals. They will wonder if he has learned something of her which is ... which has changed his mind."

"And have you?" Rathbone asked. That at least could prove some excuse, both ethically and in law, if it could be proved.

"No!" Melville's reply was unhesitating. "As far as I know she is blameless."

“Is the matter financial?” Rathbone pursued the next most likely problem. Perhaps Melville required a wife of larger fortune. Although if her father was able to be a patron to architects, then he must be of very considerable wealth. A social disadvantage seemed more likely. Or possibly Melville could not afford to keep her in the manner which she would expect.

Melville stiffened. “Certainly not!”

“You would not be the first young man not in a financial position to marry,” Rathbone said a little more gently, leaning back in his chair and regarding the young man opposite him. “It is a common enough state. Did you perhaps mislead Mr. Lambert about your prospects, albeit unintentionally?”

Melville let out his breath in a sigh. “No. No, I was very candid with him.” The shadow of a smile crossed his face, an unexpected light of humor in it, rueful and self-mocking. “Not that there would have been any point in doing any less. Mr. Lambert is largely responsible for my success. He would be in a better position to estimate my financial future than my banker or my broker would.”

“Have you some other encumbrance, Mr. Melville? A previously incurred relationship, some reason why you are not free to marry?”

Melville’s voice was very quiet. “No. I ...” He looked away from Rathbone, for the first time avoiding his eyes. “I simply cannot bear to! I like Zillah ... Miss Lambert. I regard her as a good and charming friend, but I do not wish to marry her!” He looked up again quickly, this time meeting Rathbone’s eyes, and his voice was urgent. “It all happened around me ... without my even being sensible to what was occurring. That may sound absurd to you, but believe me, it is true. I took it to be a most pleasant acquaintance.” His eyes softened. “A mutual interest in art and music and other pleasures of the mind, discussion, appreciation of the beauties of nature and of thought ... I—I found her a most delightful friend ... gentle, modest, intelligent ...” Suddenly the desperation was back in his face. “I discovered to my horror that Zillah’s mother had completely misunderstood. She had read it as a declaration of love, and before I knew where I was, she had begun to make arrangements for a wedding!”

He was sitting upright in the chair opposite Rathbone, his back straight, his hands strong and square, the nails very short, as if now and then he bit them. He clasped the chair arms as if he could not let them go.

“I tried to explain that that was not what I had meant,” he went on, biting his lips as he spoke. “But how do you do that without appearing grossly hurtful, offensive? How do I say that I do not feel that kind of emotion for her without insulting her and wounding her feelings unforgivably?” His voice rose. “And yet I never said anything, so far as I can recall, that sounded like ... that was intended to mean ... I have racked my brain, Sir Oliver, until I now no longer have any clear recollection of what I did say. I only know that announcements have been made in the *Times*, and the date is set, and I

had no say in the matter at all.” His face was pale, except for two spots of color in his cheeks. “It has all happened as if I were a prop in the center of some stage around whom the whole dance revolves, and yet I can do nothing at all to affect it. And suddenly the music is going to stop, and they are all going to wait for me to play my part and make everyone happy. I can’t do it!” He was filled with quiet despair, like a trapped creature who can no longer fight and has nowhere to run.

Rathbone found his sympathy touched in spite of his better judgment.

“Has Miss Lambert any idea of your feelings?” he asked.

Melville’s shoulders lifted slightly.

“I don’t know; I don’t think so. She is ... she is caught up in the wedding plans. I sometimes look at her face and it seems to me as if it is quite unreal to her. It is the wedding itself which has occasioned such enormous preparation, the gown, the wedding breakfast, who will be invited and who will not, what society will think.”

Rathbone found himself smiling with the same half-ironic appreciation of frailty and fear that he had seen in Melville’s eyes. He had some slight experience of society matrons who had successfully married a daughter, to the envy and the chagrin of their friends. Appearance far outweighed substance at that point. They had long ago ceased to consider whether the bride was happy, confident, or even what she actually wished. They assumed it must be what they wished for her, and acted accordingly.

Then he was afraid Melville might think he was laughing at him, which was far from the case. He leaned forward.

“I sympathize, Mr. Melville. It is most unpleasant to feel manipulated and as if no one is listening to you or considering your wishes. But then, from those of my friends who are married, I believe it is a not uncommon experience at the time of the ceremony itself. The bridegroom can seem little more than a necessary part of the stage property and not a principal in the act. That will pass, immediately after the day itself is over.”

“I am not suffering from nervousness of the day, Sir Oliver,” Melville said levelly, although such self-control obviously cost him a great effort of will. “Nor do I feel any pique at being placed at the side of events rather than in the center. I simply cannot”—he seemed to have difficulty forming the words with his lips—“bear ... to find myself married to Zillah ... Miss Lambert. I have no desire to be married to anyone at all. If at some time I shall have, it will be of my own choosing, and of theirs, not something that has been assumed by others and organized around me. I ...” Now at last there was a thread of real panic in him, and his knuckles were white where he gripped the ends of the chair arms. “I feel trapped!”

Rathbone could see that he spoke the truth.

“I assume you have done what you can to escape the contract—”

“There was no contract!” Melville cut across him. “Simply an assumption, which I did not realize soon enough to deny with any dignity or sensitivity. Now it is too late. My refusal, all my arguments, will be seen as a breach of promise.” His green-blue eyes were growing wilder, his words more rapid. “They forget what was actually said and remember the facts quite differently from the reality. I cannot stand there and argue ‘You said this’ and ‘I said that.’” He jerked one hand up sharply. “It would be absurd and degrading, and achieve nothing but mutual blame and hurt. I assure you, Sir Oliver, Mrs. Lambert is never going to admit she presumed something which was not so and that I gave her daughter no proposal of marriage, literal or implicit. How could she, now that she has announced it to the world?”

Rathbone could see that that was indeed so unlikely as to be considered impossible.

“And Mr. Lambert?” He made a last attempt, more out of habit than a belief he would learn anything which would provide a defense.

Melville’s expression was difficult to read, a mixture of admiration and despair. He sank back in the chair. “Mr. Lambert is an honest man, straightforward in word and deed. He drives a hard bargain, which is how he made his fortune, but strictly fair.” The lines around his mouth softened. “But of course he loves his daughter, and he’s fiercely loyal. He’s sensitive about his northern roots and he sometimes fancies high society thinks the less of him because he earned his money in trade ... and for that matter, so they do.” He winced a little. “I suppose it was unnecessary to say that. I apologize.”

Rathbone waved it aside. “So he would be quick to defend her from anything he saw as an insult,” he concluded.

“Yes. And there is hardly a greater insult than to break a contract of marriage.” The fear was sharp in Melville’s voice again. “He cannot afford to believe me that there was none. Mrs. Lambert is a formidable woman—” He stopped abruptly.

“I see.” Rathbone did see, extremely clearly, the nature of the predicament. He also felt increasingly certain that Melville was withholding something which he knew to be of importance. “Have you told me all the facts, Mr. Melville?”

“All that are relevant, yes.” Melville spoke so unhesitatingly that Rathbone was sure he was lying. He had been expecting the question and was prepared for it.

“You have not found your affections engaged elsewhere?” He looked at Melville closely and thought he saw a faint flush in his cheeks, although his eyes did not waver.

“I have no desire or intention of marrying anyone else,” Melville said with conviction. “You may search all you care to, you will find nothing to suggest I have paid the slightest court to any other lady. I work extremely hard, Sir Oliver. It is one of the most difficult things in the world to establish oneself as

an architect.” There was a ring of bitterness in his voice, and something which was almost certainly pride. His clear eyes were filled with light. “It requires time and skill in negotiation, patience, the art of diplomacy, as well as a vision of precisely what makes a building both beautiful and functional, strong enough to endure through generations of time and yet not so exorbitantly expensive that no one can afford to construct it. It requires a magnitude of ideas and yet note of the minutest detail. Perhaps the law is the same.” He raised his brows and stared questioningly, almost challengingly. For the first time Rathbone was conscious of the man’s remarkable mind, the breadth and the power of his intellect. He must indeed have an extraordinary strength of will. His present problem was not indicative of his character. He was certainly not a man of indecision.

“Yes,” Rathbone agreed ruefully, many of his own past romances, or near romances, fleeting through his mind. He had been too busy, too ambitious, to allow the time necessary to enlarge them into courtship. This he could understand with no effort at all. But he had not been unmindful enough of others, or of the way of the world, to allow himself to be so misunderstood that anyone, even a socially avaricious would-be mother-in-law, had missed his intentions.

“Yes, the law is a hard taskmistress, Mr. Melville,” he agreed. “And one requiring both imagination and exactitude if one is to succeed. And it also requires an ability to judge character. I confess that I do not think you are telling me the whole truth of this matter.”

He saw Melville’s face tighten and the skin around his lips turn pale.

“Many men are not particularly in love with the women they marry,” he continued, “but find the alliance quite tolerable. Even more young women accept marriages which are based upon financial or dynastic necessity. If the person is honorable, kind, and not physically repellent, they very frequently learn to love one another. At times such a union is happier than one entered into in the heat of a passion which is based upon dreams and fades when the first hunger is assuaged, and there is no friendship left to feed it or to tide them over the later times.” As he said it he knew it was true, and yet he would not have entered such an arrangement himself.

Melville looked away. “I am aware of all that, Sir Oliver, and I do not deny it. I am not prepared to marry Zillah Lambert in order to satisfy her mother’s ambitions for her, or to try to be what she desires in a husband.” He rose to his feet rather awkwardly, as if he were too rigid to coordinate his limbs as he normally might. “And profoundly grateful as I am to Barton Lambert for his patronage of my art, my obligation does not extend to the ruin of my personal happiness or peace ... of life.”

Rathbone drew in breath to ask him yet again what it was he was concealing, then saw in Melville’s face that he would not answer. Perhaps if the Lamberts did indeed sue him he would change his mind. Until then the matter was speculative anyway, and he felt increasingly that it was something

in which he did not wish to become involved. Melville could not win. And frankly, Rathbone thought he was being melodramatic about something which was no more than the lot of a vast proportion of mankind, and not so very bad.

“Then perhaps you had better see what transpires, Mr. Melville,” he said aloud, “before presuming the worst. Perhaps if you were to explain the situation to Miss Lambert herself and give her the opportunity to break the engagement, for whatever reason you can agree upon that does her no dishonor, then such an ugly and expensive matter as a legal suit could be avoided. And your relationship with Mr. Lambert would suffer far less. I assume you have taken that into your considerations? If you break your promise to Miss Lambert, you can hardly expect his future patronage.”

“Of course I have taken it into consideration!” Melville said bitterly, standing now at the door. “I cannot win! It is only a question of how much I lose. But I am not prepared to marry in order to further my professional career.” He looked at Rathbone with contempt, as if he believed Rathbone would do such a thing himself, and yet beneath the anger and the disgust there was still the deep fear—and a flickering light of hope. “I am a very good architect, Sir Oliver,” he added softly. “Some have even said brilliant. I should not need to prostitute myself in order to obtain work.”

Rathbone was stung by the words. He realized with a flush of shame that he had half intended to insult Melville, without having the slightest idea of his professional ability or anything other of his personal situation than the one problem of which he had spoken. There were numerous personal reasons why a man might not wish to marry, many often too delicate to explain to others, whatever the pressure.

“I will help you if I can, Mr. Melville,” he said more gently. “But I fear that from what you have told me, there would be very little I could do. Let us agree to leave the matter until you have done your best to persuade Miss Lambert to break the engagement herself.” He sounded more encouraging than he meant to. He did not intend to take the case. He had already given his best advice in the matter.

“Thank you,” Melville said with his hand on the door, his voice flat. “Thank you for your time, Sir Oliver.”

Rathbone put the subject from his mind and carried out his original intention of leaving his chambers in Vere Street early. It was still a lovely afternoon and he stopped the hansom cab and walked the last half mile with pleasure. He passed a couple of fashionable ladies of his acquaintance out taking the air, their crinolined skirts obliging him to step almost to the curb in order not to be in their way. He bowed to them, raising his hat, and they smiled charmingly and continued their excited conversation.

The slight breeze carried the sound of an organ grinder, and children

shouting to one another, and the rapid clip of a horse's hooves as it pulled a light carriage or gig.

He reached his home in plenty of time to eat supper, then sat and read the day's newspapers before changing into his evening clothes and leaving for Lady Hardesty's ball.

He arrived amid a crowd of other carriages and alighted, paid his driver, and went up the steps and into the blaze of lights and the swirl and glitter of enormous skirts, white shoulders, jewels of every sort, the sound of music and laughter and endless talk. Footmen moved about with trays of champagne, or lemonade for the more abstemious and the young ladies who should not overindulge, and perhaps behave in a less than seemly manner, or forget for an instant why they were there. A girl who did not make a fortunate impression in her first season was in perilous shape, and if she had not found a husband by her second, could be written off as a disaster.

Rathbone had been told these facts of life often enough, but he took them with a smile. It was an intellectual rather than emotional knowledge. Whether a man married or not was immaterial, except to himself. Society thought neither more nor less of him. All around him he heard snatches of conversation.

"What happened to Louisa?" an elderly lady in burgundy silk asked rhetorically, her eyebrows raised. "Why, my dear, she left the country. Went to live in Italy, I think. What else could she do?"

"What else?" her companion asked, her thin face expressing bewilderment, then a sudden rush of understanding. "Oh, my goodness! You don't mean she divorced him, do you? Whatever for?"

"He beat her," the lady in burgundy replied tersely, leaning her head a trifle closer. "I thought you knew that."

"I did ... but really ... I mean ... Italy, did you say?" Her eyes widened. "I suppose it was worth it ... but a terribly bad example. I don't know what the world is coming to!"

"Quite," the first matron agreed. "I shan't let my daughters know of it. It is very unsettling, and it doesn't do to allow girls to be unsettled." She lowered her voice confidentially. "One is far happier if one knows precisely what to expect of life. Rose Blaine just had her ninth, you know. Another boy. They are going to call him Albert, after the Prince."

"Speaking of whom," her friend continued, leaning even closer and moving her skirts absently, "Marian Harvey told me he is looking quite poorly these days, very pasty, you know, quite lost his good complexion, and his figure. Dyspeptic, they say."

"Well, he is a foreigner, you know," the thinner of the two said, nodding as if that explained everything. "He may be our dear Queen's husband, but—oh, you know I do wish she would stay with pink, and not ever that fierce shade of fuchsia. She looks hot enough to burst into flames any moment! They say

she never ever chooses a thing without taking his advice. Some men are color-blind, I hear. It's that German blood."

"Nonsense!" came the instant retort. "English men can be just as color-blind, if they choose."

Rathbone concealed a smile and moved away. He was well acquainted with the insularity of mind which still regarded the Prince Consort, given that official title three years before, in 1857, as being a foreigner, in spite of the fact that he was so deferred to by the Queen that he was king in all but name. He had a wide reputation for being painfully serious and more than a trifle pompous, not merely given to good works but completely overtaken by them to the point where pleasure of any sort was deeply suspect. Rathbone had met him once and found the experience daunting, and one he did not seek to repeat.

He passed a group of pretty girls, seventeen or eighteen years old, their fair skin gleaming in the light from the myriad candles in the chandeliers, their eyes bright, their voices high with nervousness, full of giggles and little squeaks. Their mothers or aunts were only yards away. One must never be without a chaperone. Reputations could be ruined.

A couple of young men were eyeing them from a distance of a few yards, standing self-consciously, pretending not to notice. One of them was so stiff his back was almost arched. They reminded Rathbone of bantam cocks.

He felt a hand on his arm and turned to see a man in his middle forties with a lean and humorous face.

"Rathbone, how are you?" he said cheerfully. "Didn't expect to see you at this sort of thing!"

"Hello, FitzRobert!" Rathbone replied with pleasure. "I was invited, and I rather fancied a little idle amusement, a spot of champagne and music."

FitzRobert's smile broadened. "Just won a notable victory?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact," Rathbone admitted, reliving his satisfaction. "I have. How are you?" He regarded his friend more closely. "You look well." It was not entirely true, but he felt tact was the better part of perception.

"Oh, I am," FitzRobert said a shade too quickly. "Busy, you know. Politics is a demanding mistress." He smiled briefly.

Rathbone struggled to remember the man's wife's name, and it came to him with a sudden picture of her face, very beautiful in a smooth, oddly discontented way. "And how is Mary?" he added.

"Very well, thank you." FitzRobert put his hands in his pockets and looked away. His eye caught a group of people several yards in the distance. The man was stocky, balding, with a plain but genial face. His features were strong, and no skill of expensive tailoring could hide the awkwardness of his stance or the weight and power of his shoulders. The woman next to him, presumably his wife, was a head shorter than he, and extremely pretty, almost

beautiful, with regular features, a long, straight nose, and wide eyes. The girl with them was demurely dressed in the customary white for a first season, only barely enhanced with trimmings of pink. The gown was doubtless extremely costly, but she did not need it to make her stand out among her peers. She was a little over average height, slender, and with quite the most beautiful hair Rathbone had ever seen. It was thick, of a muted golden bronze in color, and with a heavy curl which no art could have imitated.

“Are you acquainted with them?” Rathbone asked.

“Only slightly,” FitzRobert answered without changing expression. “He is in trade of some sort. Made himself a fortune. But of course that hardly endears him to society, although they will put up with him for his money’s sake. And he has had the grace to patronize the arts to the extent of tens of thousands of pounds.” He shrugged slightly. “Which, of course, does not make him a gentleman but at least lends him some respectability.” FitzRobert turned back to Rathbone, smiling because they both knew precisely what he meant: the subtle grades of acceptance which came so easily to those born to it and were nigh on impossible to those who were not.

Even Prince Albert was regarded with coolness by some, just as he disdained the frivolity, the wit, the self-indulgence and the sheer arrogant grace of some of the oldest aristocracy in the country, whose fortunes certainly equaled his own and whose wives had a better sense of fashion than the Queen—and jewels to match. Until very recently they had considered him a political upstart, and his endless notes and letters to be interfering.

Rathbone smiled back. He allowed FitzRobert to see in his eyes that he was going to pretend he had not noticed the shadow of unhappiness there, nor understood its deeply personal nature.

“Who is he?” he asked. “He does not look familiar to me.”

“Barton Lambert,” FitzRobert replied. “His daughter, Zillah, is engaged to marry Killian Melville, the architect. I don’t see him here tonight.” He looked around. “Devoted to his work. Not a very social man.”

Rathbone was suddenly uncertain whether he wanted to know more or not. When there were crimes and desperate injustices to fight, why on earth should he spend his time and his skills in defending a foolish young man from the consequences of his ambition and his lack of forthrightness towards a young woman who had taken him at his behavior, if not his word—as it turned out, mistakenly. It was not a matter which should waste the time of the law. It could be settled with a few well-chosen words and a little sensitivity, and strategic realignment.

“Brilliant fellow,” FitzRobert went on. “Probably one of the most original and daring thinkers of his generation. And has the technical skill and personal drive and persistence to see his ideas from the dreams into the reality.”

“With suitable help from Barton Lambert,” Rathbone added dryly.

FitzRobert was surprised. “Thought you didn’t know him!”

“Not a great deal.” Rathbone retreated with more speed than grace. “Only what I have heard. A word or two—you know how one does.”

FitzRobert smiled. “Well, I suppose he has been on people’s tongues lately. The engagement was in the *Times*.”

Rathbone spoke almost before thinking. “Perhaps you could introduce me?”

“Of course,” FitzRobert agreed. “Delighted to. For all his northern brashness, and a certain quickness to see insult where it is not intended, he is a very decent fellow. Honest as you like, and loyal. Once a friend, always a friend.”

“I don’t want to intrude.” Rathbone took a step backwards, already regretting his words. “Perhaps ...”

“Not at all,” FitzRobert said with an expansive gesture. He took Rathbone by the arm. “Come on, by all means.”

Rathbone had little choice but to follow, and a few moments later he was being introduced to Barton Lambert and his wife and daughter.

“How do you do, sir,” Lambert said with a strong northern accent. His manner was open and friendly, but he seemed not to be too impressed by Rathbone’s title.

Delphine Lambert, on the other hand, had a very different air. Closer to her, it was apparent that her marvelous jewelry was real—and almost certainly worth more than Rathbone made in half a year, although he did extremely well. And she was a remarkably pretty woman. Her skin was blemishless and the arch of her brows and delicate curve of her hairline were quite unique, as was the slope of her cheekbones. Her intelligence was apparent in her wide, clear eyes.

“How do you do, Sir Oliver,” she said with charm, but marked reserve. Rathbone had an instant feeling that were her daughter not engaged to be married, her interest in him would have been quite different. He felt a surge of relief, which was ridiculous. He was perfectly capable of declining politely! He had done it for years.

Zillah was lovely. There was a naturalness and a spontaneity about her which Rathbone liked immediately. Also, she was unashamedly happy. The knowledge of how soon it would be shattered bothered Rathbone more than he had expected.

They spoke of the usual kind of trivia, and he could see her parents’ pride in her, the quick glances of obvious affection from her father. Her pain would be his pain; her embarrassment would cut him more deeply than his own. Rathbone doubted Barton Lambert would forgive a man who hurt his daughter, privately or publicly. It was not difficult to understand. He was not a foolish man, nor one without worldly wisdom, or he could not have made the wealth he had in a harsh and highly competitive trade. Manchester—that was the area where his accent proclaimed him to have lived—was not a soft

city nor one easily to refine the rough edges from a man's manner. But neither did it have the weary sophistication of London, the cosmopolitan mixture of cultures and the press and vigor of the world's traffic. There was a kind of innocence to Barton Lambert, and looking at his face, Rathbone was sure his anger would be of the same spontaneous and unstoppable character.

The conversation was about politics. FitzRobert had just said something about Mr. Gladstone.

"Fine man," Lambert agreed. "Knew his family." He nodded.

Of course. William Ewart Gladstone, "God's vicar in the Treasury," as he had been mockingly called, was a Manchester man. There was a ring of pride in Lambert's voice.

"Couldn't be less like the Prime Minister," FitzRobert went on, referring, no doubt, to Lord Palmerston's reputation for wit and good fellowship and the distinct enjoyment of life, its pleasures as well as its duties.

A thought crossed Rathbone's mind about Mr. Gladstone's fairly well known vigor regarding the opposite sex, and the occasionally understandable interpretation of his hospitality for the less fortunate of them, whose souls he believed he might save. However, in deference to the ladies present, especially Zillah, he forbore from making any remark. He caught FitzRobert's eye and kept his face perfectly composed, but with difficulty.

They were joined a moment later by another handsome woman, accompanied by two unmarried daughters. They were all dutifully introduced, and Rathbone saw the lady's eyes sparkle with interest as she automatically assessed his eligibility, his social status and his probable income. Apparently she found them all satisfactory. She smiled at him generously.

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Sir Oliver. May I present my elder daughter, Margaret."

"How do you do, Sir Oliver," Margaret replied obediently. She was a comely enough girl with candid blue eyes and rather ordinary features. Her brown hair had been elaborately curled for the occasion. It probably became her better in its natural state, but an opportunity such as this was not to be wasted by informality. No artifice for glamour was left untried.

"How do you do, Miss Ballinger," Rathbone said civilly. He hated these forced conversations and wished more than ever that he had refused to come across with FitzRobert. Nothing he could possibly learn about Barton Lambert or his daughter would compensate for the awkwardness of it. In fact, it would be of no use whatever, because he did not intend to take Killian Melville's case, should it arise. It was Melville's own fault he was in this predicament, and he should use his common sense to get himself out of it, or else abide the consequences, which were more than likely to be only the same as those experienced by the majority of men in the world. Zillah Lambert was most attractive and would come with a handsome dowry. Left to his own choice he might well do very much worse.