Monday, December 20, 1937, dawned cold and wintry in London. On Sunday there had been snow at midday; ice and fog made driving treacherous and contributed to the interruption of commuter rail services. There were even delays on several underground routes, but not on the District Line that served Putney. It took little more than half an hour for forty-nine-year-old Etienne Bellenger to make his way from his home at 11 Lytton Grove in this quiet suburb south of the Thames to his office at 175–177 New Bond Street. Bellenger was the managing director of the London branch of Cartier, the world’s most famous jeweler. Founded in 1847, the Parisian firm catered to Europe’s elite. It particularly prided itself on being the official supplier of gems to the British royal family. Edward VII famously referred to Cartier as “the jeweler of kings and the king of jewelers.”

That Monday afternoon, a little before 3:00 p.m., the Cartier offices received a phone call from a guest at the nearby Hyde Park Hotel. A gentleman identifying himself as Captain Hambro stated that he was about to be engaged to a wealthy young woman, and he wanted a variety of expensive diamond rings brought to his hotel suite for his appraisal. The rings had to be “of a certain value”—he cited the figure of £4,000 per ring—because they would represent part of the marriage settlement. Apparently pressed for time, the client rang off with the brusque injunction: “Don’t be long.” Bellenger immediately selected nine rings and was at the hotel by 3:15.

Why wasn’t this extraordinary request—an unknown client asking for thousands of pounds of jewelry to be brought to his hotel room—simply dismissed out of hand? The answer was class. Any suspicions that Bellenger might have harbored were effectively countered in the first instance by where the request originated. The opulent Hyde Park Hotel—ostentatiously flaunting its turrets, balconies, and pillared porticos—was located at 66 Knightsbridge, one
The Hyde Park Hotel

of London’s most prestigious addresses. In 1889 investors built the massive red brick structure as a gentlemen’s club, then transformed it in 1908 into a grand hotel. Its guests included many of the royals and a wide range of celebrities, including the combative Conservative Party MP Winston Churchill, press baron Lord Beaverbrook, popular author Evelyn Waugh, and Indian nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi. It boasted richly furnished ballrooms and restaurants, as well as its own private entrance to Hyde Park. Its terrace offered a perfect vantage point for watching the Household Cavalry’s morning exercises.4

One would naturally assume that a guest at the Hyde Park Hotel would have had his or her bona fides established, but the guest who called Cartier
was not just anyone; he had registered as Captain P. L. Hambro of Wimborne Court, Dorset. The Hambros were a well-known financial dynasty. C. J. Hambro, a Danish merchant, established the Hambros Bank in 1839. In the twentieth century, Angus Valdemar Hambro was Conservative MP for South Dorset. His brother Sir Eric Hambro was Conservative MP for Wimbledon and was, coincidentally, on Cartier’s board of directors. Sir Charles Hambro, chairman of Hambros Bank, was also a director of the Bank of England. Given the family’s social prominence, it is hardly surprising that Bellenger should have responded to a Hambro call with such alacrity.

Once at the hotel, Bellenger found that he had to wait a few minutes as his client was momentarily engaged. At 3:30 the liftman took Bellenger up to the third floor where in the hallway he met the tall young man who called himself Captain Hambro. He led Bellenger to room 305 and introduced him to another young man who acted as his secretary. The formalities concluded, Bellenger presented the nine rings, pointing out their most attractive features. Two of the diamonds were rectangular; seven were emerald cut (that is, octagonal). They ranged in size from 5.06 to 10.69 carats. Smaller diamonds decorated the shoulders of the rings. The settings were platinum. Cartier valued the jewelry at £16,000, approximately sixty-four times a factory worker’s annual wage.

The three men compared the brilliance of the gems in the natural light streaming in from the windows and chatted briefly about Cartier’s rivals, the jewelers in Hatton Garden, and the general question of the resale value of diamonds. Finally the customer asked to see the gems under a desk light. This obliged Bellenger to turn his back to the communicating door that led to the adjoining room, 309. As he did so he caught sight of the secretary making some sort of signal. In response a third man immediately launched himself from the next room into 305, attacking the jeweler with a weighted cosh, or life preserver. Bellenger turned just in time to catch a glimpse of his assailant, whose features were half hidden by a pair of tinted glasses and a colored handkerchief, covering in bandana-fashion the lower part of his face.

The intruder rained blow after blow down on Bellenger’s head, but being a large man endowed with an unusually thick skull, the Frenchman persisted in fighting off his attacker, hitting out at his spectacles. At this stage the so-called secretary yelled, “Come on, finish it quick!” and tackled the jeweler, who, being brought to the ground, received an additional four painful cracks to the skull. The young man who had posed as Hambro simply sat by and observed the uneven fight. Amazingly enough, Bellenger, though he received fifteen
blows to the head, never lost consciousness. Nevertheless, exhausted and outnumbered, he gave up the struggle and collapsed on the floor.9

At about 4:20, Henrietta Gordon, a housemaid who not only worked but also lived in the hotel, heard some unusual noises—like something being smashed—coming from room 305. She later told the police that she remembered the hour as that was “the time I have to call a titled lady.” She alerted Enrico Laurenti, a waiter, who detected what he thought sounded like “muffled laughing.” The two domestics listened at the door and initially heard nothing more, but two minutes later the gentleman whom Laurenti had earlier served that day came out of room 305 and, partly walking, partly running, dashed down the hall. A moment later a second man emerged from 305 and strode briskly to the lift. Gordon noted that the second man was laughing, had a fashionable “teddy bear coat” negligently draped over his arm, and “had the most beautiful set of teeth.”10

Concerned that something was amiss, Gordon and Laurenti knocked on the door of 305. When they received no response Laurenti used his master key to get in. He was shocked to find a large man lying on his back in a pool of blood. The waiter’s first instinct was to prevent Gordon from entering. “For God’s sake don’t come in, get the manager or get somebody.” He called the porter to try to apprehend the two men from 305, but they had already fled the hotel. He then phoned the manager, Mr. Burdett, who in turn called the police and a doctor.11

In the meantime Laurenti thought it wise to put up a screen by the open door to hide from public view the disturbing crime scene. A small side table with two broken legs lay on the carpet along with a large diamond ring and a ring box. Laurenti picked up the ring and put it and the box on the mantelpiece. In the center of the room lay a man with a split skull whom the maid first thought was dead. Revived, he managed to cry out, “Help, help,” and repeated again and again, “They’ve got my rings.”12 Taking towels from the bathroom, Gordon did her best to clean and comfort him until the doctor arrived.13

Dr. Victor Constad got to the hotel along with the police at a little after 4:30. He found Bellenger fully conscious “in spite of the terrible battering he had obviously received.”14 The maid, the waiter, and the doctor lifted him onto a couch. He had received at least a dozen head wounds and manifested the classic symptoms of traumatic brain injury. His left arm was paralyzed, and one side of his face was uncontrollably quivering.15
Detective Inspector Henry Hayward of Scotland Yard led the first police on the scene. In the room the detectives found a diamond ring and ring box, a pair of tinted glasses, a Chesterfield cigarette package, a depleted bottle of whiskey, several glasses, and a soda siphon. Bellenger gave a brief if somewhat garbled account of the robbery before being rushed by ambulance to the Beaumont House Nursing Home (off Marylebone High Street), the doctor telling the officers that it was impossible for him to provide a prognosis.

Based on what Bellenger and the hotel staff told them, the police began to sketch out a picture of the assailants. All the witnesses agreed that at the very least three men were involved—the one who called himself Captain Hambro and booked the room, his “secretary,” and the man who wielded the cosh. All three, according to Bellenger, were in their twenties and wore dark lounge suits.

The hotel staff had had the most contact with the first suspect, who had arrived at 1:20 that afternoon. They described him as a tall man with a pointed chin and nose. He called himself Captain P. L. Hambro of Dorset and asked for a suite. He stated that he would be staying until Christmas Eve and that his luggage would be arriving later in the afternoon. Reginald Sidney Kelly, the receptionist, recalled the man insisting, “I want a single bedroom and sitting room,” but not caring if the suite faced the park or Knightsbridge. Kelly assigned him 305 and 309.

The young man ordered a bottle of Black and White whiskey and a siphon, adding, “And send along some glasses.” Since he had no luggage the receptionist asked him to pay for the drink in cash. Kelly was suspicious, in part because he noted that the new arrival kept his gloves on, even when signing the registration form. He told the other receptionist that he thought the client might be a “bogey” or fraud. He certainly was concerned about money. At about 1:45, Enrico Laurenti, the waiter on duty, took the bottle of whiskey to 305. As he was about to leave the guest, sprawled on a couch, asked, “What about my change?” Laurenti pointed out that there was no change, as the pound the guest had given was just sufficient to cover the costs of the drink.

It was that elusive something, the style or bearing of the suspects, that the hotel staff most remembered. James Clarke, one of the liftmen at the Hyde Park, thought he might recognize at least one of the men he took to the third floor at about 2:00 p.m. He was between twenty-four and thirty years of age, five feet ten inches tall, and dressed in a blue-gray, double-breasted overcoat,
belted at the back. To Clarke he looked like “a traveler” or salesman, for he did not have “the accent of a cultured and well educated person.”

Sloan, another liftman at the hotel, reported taking to the third floor a smartly dressed man, twenty to thirty years of age, about six feet tall, with dark brown, brilliantined hair. “This man spoke like a gentleman and gave me the impression of being rather effeminate.”

When Sloan later took Bellenger up to the third floor, William Peter Jefferies, one of the hotel’s receptionists, who had been told by his colleague that he was doubtful about the man in 305, accompanied him. In the hallway he found a tall man asking the way to 305. Jefferies told the police he had a pointed nose, wore a blue suit and red carnation, and was “very good looking in an effeminate way.” Kelly recalled a man with dark wavy hair, good teeth, wearing a blue pinstripe suit, red carnation, and white gloves, but no hat or overcoat. “He was exceptionally well dressed and walked and spoke rather effeminately. He was well spoken but I could not trace any particular accent.”

Henrietta Gordon gave a similar account of the scene. She said that the new guest had taken the wrong direction and she had to direct him to room 305. She described him as a slim, tall man, sporting a red carnation and wearing a blue suit with the trousers riding high. “He was definitely like a pansy boy—a proper ‘Sissy.’” His associate, in Gordon’s opinion, had a more “gentlemanly appearance.”

The men of London’s B Division, working from the Gerald Road Police Station, located between Victoria Station and Sloane Square, carried out the police investigation. One of the first acts of the Metropolitan Police was to broadcast a bulletin stating that they sought for questioning three smartly dressed young men.

Three men; 1st, gave name P. L. Hambro, b. 1911, 6ft., slim build, h. dk. brown (wavy), sharp pointed nose turning slightly to l., pimply face, good looking; dress, blue suit (white pin stripe).—2nd, b. 1902 to 1907, 5ft 10in., medium build, h. brown (brushed back); dress, dk. suit, lt. teddy bear overcoat (buff colour), no hat.—3rd, b. 1917, 5ft 10in., slim build, h. fair; smartly dressed. All effeminate in manner.

Though the police first reported that they sought P. L Hambro and two others for robbery, they soon realized that the chief suspect had merely presented himself as a member of the banking family. They learned in addition from
Angus Hambro that though several members of the family lived in Dorset, Wimborne Court itself did not exist. 29

Concerned that the suspects might try to leave the country, Special Branch sent descriptions of the three men and the jewels to police detachments at Dover, Folkestone, Gravesend, Grimsby, Harwich, Holyhead, Hull, Newcastle, Newhaven, Southampton, Plymouth, and the port of London, and to the airports at Croydon, Heston, and Lympne. 30 Scotland Yard’s Information Room instructed officers to alert pawnbrokers and jewelers about the robbery and have them provide information on any gems offered for sale. To rouse the public’s interest, Lloyd’s of London, the insurer, offered a reward of £1,500 for information that would lead to the arrest of Bellenger’s attackers and the recovery of the rings. 31

As so often happens with criminal cases, the Hyde Park Hotel robbery, sensationally reported by the press, drew the attention of cranks who peppered the police with misinformation. On December 21, Jack Davies, of Kentish Town, telephoned to say he knew that the robbers would meet that night to dispose of the loot. He dramatically concluded: “I cannot say anymore now as I believe I am being ‘tailed.’” 32 That was the last the police heard of him. An anonymous female correspondent had an equally vivid imagination. She wrote to say that she had just seen going into a bookstore on Artillery Row a man who had been connected a few years earlier with a group of robbers. “This man would not be in England unless it would be for some Business,” she warned. Having read of the plundering of Cartier she knew he must be involved. “This tall elegant effeminate man usually has a smart suite of rooms in a fashionable square of London & has an extraordinary fascinating manner & if he is with a gang are [sic] most dangerous. I know because I met most of them a few years ago while chaperoning an actress. I will not sign my name. It would be too dangerous.” 33

Despite such red herrings, the police owed their most important lead to the actions of yet another private citizen. The breakthrough came when Cyril Smith, a night porter at the Clarendon Hotel in Oxford, informed the local police that on the morning of December 21, at about 6:30 a.m., three men arrived from London in a four-seat, gray saloon Jaguar. Apparently unfamiliar with the car, they had to ask Smith to open the trunk. The youngest of them, though pale and trembling, asked if a suite was available. Two of the travelers registered and the hotel gave them a large room with two beds. Their
companion drove off in a northerly direction. Ending his shift at 9:00 a.m., Smith had the chance to read the morning newspaper accounts of the previous afternoon’s robbery. Could these three well-dressed fellows, he asked himself, be the men the police were looking for? It was hard to understand why they would have left London at 4:00 in the morning.

Smith reported his suspicions to the local police, who in turn informed Scotland Yard. Inspector Arthur Rolfhe of the Oxford police went along to the Clarendon, taking several constables with him. There the maid told him that the new arrivals had had tea in their room but asked her not to put on the light or draw the curtains. Going to the room Rolfhe found that the two who had registered as Lammer and Jamieson now identified themselves as John Lonsdale and Peter Jenkins. The former stated that he was a company director and a steward of the Greyhound Racing Association and gave as his address Wimborne, Dorset. Jenkins, a handsome young man, said he was an accountant with Lester Parry and Company at 11 Great Marlborough Street, where he worked with his brother, Gerald Jenkins. When the police turned up, Jenkins was still in bed, and the blond-haired Lonsdale was dressing, but neither seemed obviously perturbed by this unexpected visit. They readily admitted having read about the robbery. On one of the beds lay a copy of the *Daily Mail*, which contained a full account. Their story was that they had been at a Mayfair “bottle party” (an after-hours drinking establishment) the night before and in the wee hours of the morning decided to drive up to Oxford with a friend who was visiting relatives in the neighborhood. He was to pick them up later.

Rolfhe left two constables to keep an eye on the suspects while he sought London’s advice. At 12:45 the men left the hotel to cash a check and then went to the Mitre Hotel where Jenkins asked a page boy (who later described him as a tall, “very good looking” gentleman) if he could “very quickly” arrange a phone call to Ladbroke 0707; when he got through, a woman answered. The two suspects then attempted to slip out the hotel’s back door, but finding the police waiting for them, they finally lost their composure. “We are tired of being chased around like a couple of criminals,” complained Lonsdale, “and we are getting the 1:47 train to London. Where can we get a taxi?” They were indeed to return to London, but under police escort. Chief Inspector Leonard Burt in London had told Rolfhe that the facts that the men’s descriptions matched that of the suspects and that Lonsdale and P.L. Hambro both gave Wimborne, Dorset, as their home address were grounds for insisting that the
The Robbery

three visitors be detained, brought back to London, and subjected to a thorough interrogation.37

Chief Inspector Burt took the 4:45 train from Paddington up to Oxford where he met the now indignant suspects, who demanded to see their solicitors. Lonsdale was particularly excited, insisting that he be shown Burt’s warrant card. What proof was there that he was a policeman? When that ploy failed, Lonsdale asked to see Burt privately. He now told the chief inspector that he was linked to the Secret Service and had important information for the War Office. It was imperative he make calls to London and Paris. When asked who his contact was in the Foreign Office he could only think of a chap in Copenhagen. His final claim was that he was an agent for an arms company—Hermann Zollinger of Limmatquai 94, Zurich, Switzerland. Burt was unmoved.38

In the meantime the police located the third suspect, the driver of the car, when a call came in to the Clarendon Hotel for “Mr. Lammer,” the name Lonsdale had registered under. It was from a David Wilmer at Blockley 227, the number of Sir John Porter’s home near Moreton-in-Marsh, one of the principal market towns in the northern Cotswolds, approximately thirty miles to the west of Oxford. At 4:45 on December 21, Sergeant Thomas H. Smith of the Gloucestershire Constabulary went to Keytes End, Bourton-on-the-Hill, the home of Sir John and Lady Porter. The police had a complicated relationship with the upper classes. One officer recalled in his memoirs of how, in pursuit of a jewel thief, he once had to negotiate with a haughty woman who was offended by his simple request that he be allowed to search her house. “She considered me as though she suspected some fault with the drains.”39 Smith was accordingly cautious. He first had to talk to the Porters and Brigadier Wilmer, David’s father. They finally let him speak to David, a young man whose most notable feature was his dark, artificially waved hair. He admitted knowing the other Londoners. “Yes, I know Lonsdale and Jenkins. I brought them to Oxford today.” Having cautioned and arrested him, Smith drove Wilmer to Moreton-in-Marsh. He did not seem to understand the seriousness of the situation, asking the constable: “Can we stop at the Chemists. I must get some peroxide. I use it every day to clean my teeth.” When the policeman did not answer, he repeated his request.40 The Gloucester police handed Wilmer over to Inspector Robert Fabian, who had come up from London with Burt. He brought Wilmer back to Oxford that evening. The Gloucestershire Constabulary, who searched the Jaguar, reported finding six gloves, one pair of lady’s
gloves cut to fit a man, slightly stained with what could have been blood, one jewel case, one piece of flex, and one small metal casing.

In London, the police added Robert Harley as the fourth man to the list of suspects. They knew he had ties to the three other men. This linkage alone clearly did not provide evidence of his involvement in the robbery. Nevertheless, on the afternoon of December 21, Inspectors Fabian and Hayward accosted him at the Queen Street Post Office. “We are Police Officers,” declared Hayward. “A jeweler was attacked in the Hyde Park Hotel yesterday and robbed of a number of valuable rings.” “I know, I have read about it,” replied Harley, a powerfully built, mustachioed man in his mid-twenties. He protested his innocence but, given that he fit the description of one of the suspects, agreed to come to the Vine Street Police Station to provide an account of his movements on December 20.

In Oxford, having missed the last train back to London, the three Londoners and six police officers set off at 11:00 p.m. in two motorcars for the capital. The suspects had driven up to Oxford in a luxurious Jaguar. In order to return them to London, the police, who had at their disposal only one modest Morris 12, had to borrow a car belonging to Superintendent Norman Goodchild of the Oxford police. If the police were embarrassed by their lack of resources they made no mention of it in their report. They also made no explicit reference to the detained men’s class. It was nevertheless highly unusual for them to deal with such well-dressed gentlemen. John Lonsdale, Peter Jenkins, David Wilmer, and Robert Harley had been apprehended. The question was: who were they?