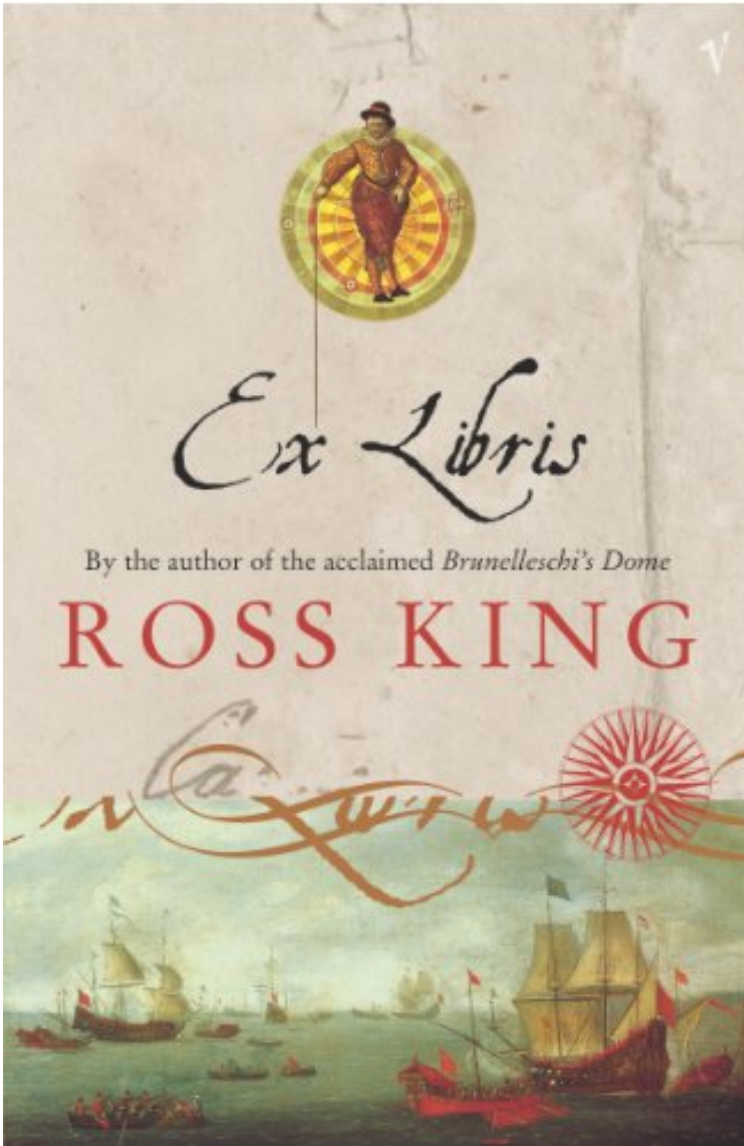


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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurResponding to a cryptic summons to a remote country house, London bookseller Isaac Inchbold finds himself responsible for restoring a magnificent library pillaged during the English Civil War, and in the process slipping from the surface of 1660s London into an underworld of spies and smugglers, ciphers and forgeries. As he assembles the fragments of a complex historical mystery, Inchbold learns how Sir Ambrose Plessington, founder of the library, escaped from Bohemia on the eve of the Thirty Years War with plunder from the Imperial Library. Inchbold's hunt for one of these stolen volumes - a lost Hermetic text - soon casts him into an elaborate intrigue; his fortunes hang on the discovery of the missing manuscript but his search reveals that the elusive volume is not what it seems and that he has been made an unwitting

player in a treacherous game. Extrait Chapter One Anyone wishing to purchase a book in London in the year 1660 had a choice of four areas. Ecclesiastical works could be bought from the booksellers in St Paul's Churchyard, while the shops and stalls of Little Britain specialised in Greek and Latin volumes, and those on the western edge of Fleet Street stocked legal texts for the city's barristers and magistrates. The fourth place to look for a book and by far the best would have been on London Bridge. In those days the gabled buildings on the ancient bridge housed a motley assortment of shops. Here were found two glovers, a swordmaker, two milliners, a tea merchant, a bookbinder, several shoemakers, as well as a manufacturer of silk parasols, an invention that had lately come into fashion. There was also, on the north end, the shop of a plummasier who sold brightly coloured feathers for the crowns of beaver hats like that worn by the new king. Most of all, though, the bridge was home to fine booksellers six of them in all by 1660. Because these shops were not stocked to suit the needs of vicars or lawyers, or anyone else in particular, they were more varied than those in the other three districts, so that almost everything ever scratched on to a parchment or printed and bound between covers could be found on their shelves. And the shop on London Bridge whose wares were the most varied of all stood halfway across, in Nonsuch House, where, above a green door and two sets of polished window-plates, hung a signboard whose weather-worn inscription read: NONSUCH BOOKS All Volumes Bought Sold Isaac Inchbold, Proprietor I am Isaac Inchbold, Proprietor. By the summer of 1660 I had owned Nonsuch Books for some eighteen years. The bookshop itself, with its copiously furnished shelves on the ground floor and its cramped lodgings one twist of a turnpike stair above those, had resided on London Bridge and in a corner of Nonsuch House, the most handsome of its buildings for much longer: almost forty years. I had been apprenticed there in 1635, at the age of fourteen, after my father died during an outburst of plague and my mother, confronted shortly afterwards with his debts, helped herself to a cup of poison. The death of Mr Smallpace, my master also from the plague coincided with the end of my apprenticeship and my entry as a freeman into the Company of Stationers. And so on that momentous day I became proprietor of Nonsuch Books, where I have lived ever since in the disorder of several thousand morocco- and buckram-bound companions. Mine was a quiet and contemplative life among my walnut shelves. It was made up of a series of undisturbed routines modestly pursued. I was a man of wisdom and learning or so I liked to think but of dwarfish worldly experience. I knew everything about books, but little, I admit, of the world that bustled past outside my green door. I ventured into this alien sphere of churning wheels and puffing smoke and scurrying feet as seldom as circumstances permitted. By 1660 I had travelled barely more than two dozen leagues beyond the gates of London, and I rarely travelled much within London either, not if I could avoid it. While running simple errands I often became hopelessly confused in the maze of crowded, filthy streets that began twenty paces beyond the north gate of the bridge, and as I limped back to my shelves of books I would feel as if I were returning from exile. All of which combined with near-sightedness, asthma and a club foot that lent me a lopsided gait makes me, I suppose, an improbable agent in the events that are to follow. What else must you know about me? I was unduly comfortable and content. I was entering my fortieth year with almost everything a man of my inclinations could ask for. Besides a prospering business, I had all of my teeth, most of my hair, very little grey in my beard, and a handsome, well-tended paunch on which I could balance a book while I sat hour after hour every evening in my favourite horsehair armchair. Each night an old woman named Margaret cooked my supper, and twice a week another poor wretch, Jane, scrubbed my dirty stockings. I had no wife. I had married as a young man, but my wife, Arabella, had died some years ago, five days after scratching her finger on a door-latch. Our world was a dangerous place. I had no children either. I had dutifully sired my share four in all but they too had died from one affliction or another and now lay buried alongside their mother in the outer churchyard of St Magnus-the-Martyr, to which I still made weekly excursions with a bouquet from the stall of a flower-seller. I had neither hopes nor expectations of remarriage. My circumstances suited me uncommonly well. What else? I lived alone except for my apprentice, Tom Monk, who was confined after the conclusion of business hours to the top floor of Nonsuch House, where he ate and slept in a chamber that was not much bigger than a cubby-hole. But Monk never complained. Nor, of course, did I. I was luckier than most of the 400,000 other souls crammed inside the walls of London or outside in the Liberties. My business provided me with 150 per year a handsome sum in those days, especially for a man without either a family or tastes for the sensual pleasures so readily available in London. And no doubt my quiet and bookish idyll would have continued, no doubt my comfortable life would have remained intact and blissfully undisturbed until I took my place in the small rectangular plot reserved for me next to Arabella, had it not been for a peculiar summons delivered to my shop one day in the summer of 1660. On that warm morning in July the door to an intricate and singular

house creaked invitingly ajar. I who considered myself so wise and sceptical was then to proceed in ignorance along its dark arteries, stumbling through blind passages and secret chambers in which, these many years later, I still find myself searching in vain for a clue. It is easier to find a labyrinth, writes Comenius, than a guiding path. Yet every labyrinth is a circle that begins where it ends, as Boethius tells us, and ends where it begins. So it is that I must double back, retrace my false turns and, by unspooling this thread of words behind me, arrive once again at the place where, for me, the story of Sir Ambrose Plessington began. The event to which I refer took place on a Tuesday morning in the first week of July. I well remember the date, for it was only a short time after King Charles II had returned from his exile in France to take the throne left empty when his father was beheaded by Cromwell and his cronies eleven years earlier. The day began like any other. I unbarred my wooden shutters, lowered my green awning into a soft breeze, and sent Tom Monk to the General Letter Office in Clock Lane. It was Monk's duty each morning to carry out the ashes from the grate, brush the floors, empty the chamber-pots, cleanse the sink and fetch the coal. But before he performed any of these tasks I sent him into Dowgate to call for my letters. I was most particular about my post, especially on Tuesdays, which was when the mail-bag from Paris arrived by packet-boat. When he finally returned, having dallied, as usual, along Thames Street on the way back, a copy of Shelton's translation of Don Quixote, the 1652 edition, was propped on my paunch. I looked up from the page and, adjusting my spectacles, squinted at the shape in the doorway. No spectacle-maker has ever been able to grind a pair of lenses thick enough to remedy my squinch-eyed stare. I marked my place with a forefinger and yawned. 'Anything for us?' 'One letter, sir.' 'Well? Let us have it, then.' 'He made me pay tuppence for it.' 'Pardon me?' 'The clerk.' He extended his hand. 'He said it was undertaxed, sir. Not a paid letter, he said. So I had to pay tuppence.' 'Very well.' I set Don Quixote aside, remunerated Monk with a show of irritation, then seized the letter. 'Now off with you. Go fetch the coal.' I was expecting to hear from Monsieur Grimaud, my factor in Paris, who had been instructed to bid on my behalf for a copy of Vignon's edition of the Odyssey. But I saw immediately that the letter, a single sheet tied with string and embossed with a seal, bore the green stamp of the Inland Office rather than the red one of the Foreign Office. This was peculiar, because domestic mail arrived at the General Letter Office on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. For the moment, however, I thought little of this oddity. The Post Office was in a state of upheaval like everything else. Already many of the old postmasters Cromwell's busiest spies, so the rumours went had been relieved of their positions, and the Postmaster-General, John Thurloe, was clapped up in the Tower. I turned the letter over in my hand. In the top, right-hand corner a stamped mark read '1st July', which meant that the letter had arrived in the General Letter Office two days earlier. My name and address were inscribed across it in a secretary hand, slantwise and hectic. The writing was blotched in some places and faint in others, as if the ink was old and powdery or the goose quill splayed at the nib or worn to a stump. The oblong impression of a signet ring on the reverse bore a coat of arms with the legend 'Marchamont'. I cut the frayed string with my penknife, broke the seal with my thumb and unfolded the sheet. I still possess this strange letter, my summons, the first of the many texts that led me towards the ever-receding figure of Sir Ambrose Plessington, and I reproduce it here, word for word:

28th June  
Pontifex Hall  
Crampton  
MagnaDorsetshire  
My good Sir: I trust you will forgive the impertinence of a Lady writing to a stranger to make what will seem, I have no doubt, a peculiar request; but circumstances force the expediency upon me. These melancholy affairs are of a pressing nature, but I believe you can play no small part in their resolution. I dare not enumerate further details until I have your more private attentions, and must therefore, with regret, depend entirely on your trust. My request is for your presence at Pontifex Hall at the earliest possible convenience. To this end a coach driven by Mr Phineas Greenleaf will be waiting for you beneath the sign of the Three Pigeons in High Holborn, at 8 o'clock in the morning of the 5th of July. You have nothing to apprehend from this journey, which I promise shall be made worth your while. Here I must break off, with the assurance that I am, dear Sir, with gratitude,  
Your most obliging servant,  
Alethea Greatorex

Postscriptum:  
Let this caution regulate your actions: neither mention to anyone your receipt of this letter, nor disclose to them your destination or purpose. That was all, nothing more. The strange communication offered no further information, no further inducements. After reading it through once more, my first response was to crumple it into a ball. I had no doubt that the 'melancholy' and 'pressing' business of Alethea Greatorex involved disposing of a crumbling estate entailed upon her by a late indigent husband. The sorry appearance of the unpaid letter suggested the impecunious condition of its author. No doubt Pontifex Hall comprised among its meagre charms a library with whose modest contents she hoped to appease her creditors. Requests of this variety were not unusual, of course. The sad business of assigning values to the dire remains of bankrupt

estates mostly those of old Royalist families whose fortunes had tumbled low during Cromwell's time had three or four times fallen within the compass of my duties. Usually I purchased the better editions myself, then sent the rest of the worm-eaten lot to auction, or else to Mr Hopcroft, the rag-and-bone man. But never in the course of my duties had I been engaged under such secretive terms or required to travel as far as Dorsetshire. And yet I didn't discard the letter. One of the more cryptic phrases 'I dare not enumerate further details' had snagged my imagination, as did the plea in the postscript for secrecy. I pushed my spectacles further up the bridge of my nose and once again fixed the letter with a myopic squint. I wondered why I should feel I had something to 'apprehend' from the journey and how the vague promise that it would be worth my time might fulfil itself. The profit to which the words alluded seemed at once grander and vaguer than any vulgar financial transaction. Or was this simply my imagination, anxious as usual to weave and then unpick a mystery? Monk had disposed of the rubbish in the ash-can and was now returning through the door with a few lumps of sea coal clattering in his pail. He set it on the floor, sighed, picked up his broom and brushed apathetically at a beam of sunlight. I laid the letter aside, but a second later took it up to study more closely the secretary hand, an old-fashioned style even for those days. I read the letter again, slowly, and this time its text seemed less explicable, less certainly the appeal of a financially embarrassed widow. I spread it on the counter and studied the crested seal more closely, regretting the haste with which I broke it, for the legend was no longer decipherable. And it was at this point that I noticed something peculiar about the letter, one more of its strange and, for the moment, inexplicable traits. As I held the paper to the light I realised that the author had folded the paper twice and sealed it not with wax but a rust-coloured shellac. This was not unusual in itself, of course: most people, myself included, sealed their letters by melting a stick of shellac. But as I gathered the flakes and tried to reconstruct the image impressed by the matrix I noticed how the shellac was mingled with a substance of a slightly different colour and composition: something darker and less adherent. I moved the letter into the beam of light falling across my counter. Monk's broom rasped slowly across the floorboards, and I became aware of his curious gaze. I prised at the seal with the blade of my penknife as gently as an apothecary slicing the seed pod of a rare plant. The compound crumbled and then sprinkled over the counter. A beeswax was clearly distinguishable from the shellac into which, for whatever reason, it was mingled. I carefully separated a few of the grains, puzzled that my hand seemed to be trembling. 'Is there something wrong, Mr Inchbold?' 'No, Monk. Nothing at all. Back to work with you now.' I straightened and gazed over his head, out of the window. The narrow street was busy with its morning commerce of bobbing heads and revolving wheels. Dust was raised from the carriageway and, caught in the slats of morning sunlight, turned to gold. I lowered my eyes to the flakes on the counter. What, if anything, might the mixture mean? That Lady Marchamont's matrix bore a residue of wax? That she had dosed another letter with a beeswax only moments before sealing mine with shellac? It hardly made sense. But then neither did the alternative: that someone had moulded her original wax seal, broken it, then closed it with shellac impressed by a counterfeit seal. My pulses quickened. Yes, it seemed most likely that the seal had been tampered with. But by whom? Someone in the General Letter Office? That might explain the delay in its delivery why it was available on a Tuesday instead of a Monday. There were rumours that letter-openers and copyists worked out of the top floor of the General Letter Office. But to what purpose? So far as I knew, my correspondence had never been opened before not even the packets sent by my factors in Paris and Oxford, those two bastions of Royalist exiles and malcontents. It was more plausible, of course, that my correspondent was the true object of this scrutiny. Still, I was struck with the oddity of the situation. Why, if she had something to fear, should Lady Marchamont have entrusted her correspondence to a means of conveyance as famously unscrupulous as the Post Office? Why not send the summons with Mr Phineas Greenleaf or some other messenger? As I folded the letter along its creases and tucked it in my pocket I felt no uneasiness, as perhaps I should have done. Instead I felt only a mild interest. I was curious, that was all. I felt as if the peculiar letter and its seal were merely parts of a difficult but by no means incomprehensible puzzle to be solved by an application of the powers of reason and I had tremendous faith in the powers of reason, especially my own. The letter was just one more text awaiting its decipherment. And so on a sudden impulse I arranged for an incredulous Monk to tend to the shop while I, like Don Quixote, prepared to leave my shelves of books and venture into the country into the world that, so far, I had managed to avoid. For the rest of the day I served my usual customers, helping them, as always, to find editions of this work or commentaries on that one. But today the ritual had been altered, because all the while I felt the letter rustling quietly in my pocket with soft, anonymous whispers of conspiracy. As instructed, I showed it to no one, nor did I tell anyone, not even Monk, where I would be travelling or to whom I proposed to pay my

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