

MICHAEL
KORDA

CURTAIN

A NOVEL

CURTAIN

a novel



NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • TOKYO • SINGAPORE



SUMMIT BOOKS
SIMON & SCHUSTER BUILDING
1230 AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10020

THIS BOOK IS A WORK OF FICTION. NAMES, CHARACTERS, PLACES AND INCIDENTS ARE EITHER THE PRODUCT OF THE AUTHOR'S IMAGINATION OR ARE USED FICTITIOUSLY. ANY RESEMBLANCE TO ACTUAL EVENTS OR LOCALES OR PERSONS, LIVING OR DEAD, IS ENTIRELY COINCIDENTAL.

COPYRIGHT © 1991 BY SUCCESS RESEARCH
CORPORATION

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
INCLUDING THE RIGHT OF REPRODUCTION
IN WHOLE OR IN PART IN ANY FORM

SUMMIT BOOKS AND COLOPHON ARE TRADEMARKS
OF SIMON & SCHUSTER
DESIGNED BY EVE METZ
MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

KORDA, MICHAEL
CURTAIN: A NOVEL / MICHAEL KORDA.

P. CM.

I. TITLE.

PS3561.06566C87 1991
813'.54—DC20 90-23198

CIP

ISBN 0-671-68684-4



BY MICHAEL KORDA

CURTAIN
THE FORTUNE
QUEENIE
WORLDLY GOODS
CHARMED LIVES
SUCCESS!
POWER!
MALE CHAUVINISM

Michael Korda

SUMMIT BOOKS

CURTAIN

a novel



NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • TOKYO • SINGAPORE



SUMMIT BOOKS
SIMON & SCHUSTER BUILDING
1230 AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10020

THIS BOOK IS A WORK OF FICTION. NAMES, CHARACTERS, PLACES AND INCIDENTS ARE EITHER THE PRODUCT OF THE AUTHOR'S IMAGINATION OR ARE USED FICTITIOUSLY. ANY RESEMBLANCE TO ACTUAL EVENTS OR LOCALES OR PERSONS, LIVING OR DEAD, IS ENTIRELY COINCIDENTAL.

COPYRIGHT © 1991 BY SUCCESS RESEARCH
CORPORATION

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
INCLUDING THE RIGHT OF REPRODUCTION
IN WHOLE OR IN PART IN ANY FORM

SUMMIT BOOKS AND COLOPHON ARE TRADEMARKS
OF SIMON & SCHUSTER
DESIGNED BY EVE METZ
MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

KORDA, MICHAEL
CURTAIN: A NOVEL / MICHAEL KORDA.

P. CM.

I. TITLE.

ps3561.06566C87 1991
813'.54—DC20 90-23198

CIP

ISBN 0-671-68684-4

FOR MARGARET
WITH ALL MY LOVE

*"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players."*

—As You Like It

PROLOGUE



Rain poured down out of a cold, gunmetal-gray sky.

Despite the blazing fire, and central heating set so high that moisture ran down the inside of the windows, Lord Vane was shivering, his lips and fingernails an alarming blue. His hands shook so badly that he had great difficulty holding his knife and fork for his first meal downstairs in many weeks.

He had been dying for months, breaking his own cardinal rule: "When you've finished what you're doing, get offstage as soon as you can."

Even the press was bored waiting for England's first theatrical peer and greatest actor to make his exit. Vane's obituaries had been prepared for ages, along with all the feature articles and photographs that would accompany them. A week ago an equerry had arrived from Buckingham Palace bearing a handwritten note from the Queen herself, informing Lord Vane that her thoughts, and those of the entire Royal Family, were with him, but even this unprecedented honor had failed to make up his mind.

Indeed, the message seemed to have had a contrary effect. To everyone's surprise, he had rallied, perhaps only to spite his doctors. His breathing improved, he was allowed out of bed to sit for an hour at a time, then to take a few faltering steps, supported by his nurse. Finally, he expressed his desire—his *intention*, to be more accurate—to come down to luncheon, despite the doctors' warnings on the subject.

Cook had labored long and hard, but Vane hardly touched a thing. He sipped at his wine and made a show of moving the food

around on his plate, but it was as if merely *looking* at it was as much as he could manage.

Lady Vane, who had been opposed to the idea from the very beginning, hardly even bothered to conceal her impatience. Guillam Pentecost, Vane's collaborator, theatrical adviser, and confidant for nearly forty years, ate heartily, as he always did. The three of them were seated at one end of a long dining table that could hold—had once often held—eighteen people. The effect was rather like that of a meal in an officers' mess the day after a battle, the survivors dwarfed by the room and the table.

Vane slumped in his chair at the head of the table, exhausted. Even in distress, his dignity was immense. With his snow-white hair, the short beard he had grown in old age, the famous dark blue eyes, and his majestic profile, he might have been playing Lear in modern dress. He waved away the butler, who was holding a silver sauceboat full of custard. "Tea," he said weakly. "A cup of tea, with a drop or two of brandy."

Lady Vane frowned. "Is that a *good* idea, Robby, darling?" she asked.

"It seems like a bloody good idea to *me*," Vane glared at the butler, who glanced toward Lady Vane. She sighed and nodded her head. After all, there was no point in contradicting him now. "Did Guillam tell you how well the exhibit is coming along, darling?" she asked, raising her voice. Vane refused to wear a hearing aid, but on the other hand he didn't like being shouted at, which made it hard for those around him to know how loud to speak.

The exhibit was being held in the National Theatre to mark Lord Vane's eighty-fifth birthday, and many of his mementos, carefully selected by Pentecost, would be on display there. Originally it had been intended that Vane himself would open the exhibit, but that plan had long since been shelved, and Lady Vane was to replace him.

Vane closed his eyes—the eyelids were pale blue, almost transparent, the skin so pale and tightly stretched over his bones that he might already have been dead—and thought for a moment. "I think so," he said at last. "Don't give a damn. I shan't live to see it."

Pentecost spoke up with false cheeriness. "I'll bet you *do*, Robby. My money's on you to cut the ribbon. It's going to be fascinating, you know . . . your costumes, your notebooks, your prompt copies, hundreds of photographs. . . . There'll be television sets all over the place playing scenes from your films. 'Multimedia,' they call it, whatever the hell that means."