

I

THE OTHER SERVANTS FALL SILENT as Lister enters the room.

‘Their life,’ says Lister, ‘a general mist of error. Their death, a hideous storm of terror. – I quote from *The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster, an English dramatist of old.’

‘When you say a thing is not impossible, that isn’t quite as if to say it’s possible,’ says Eleanor who, although younger than Lister, is his aunt. She is taking off her outdoor clothes. ‘Only technically is the not impossible, possible.’

‘We are not discussing possibilities today,’ Lister says. ‘Today we speak of facts. This is not the time for inconsequential talk.’

‘Of facts accomplished,’ says Pablo the handyman.

Eleanor hangs her winter coat on a hanger.

‘The whole of Geneva will be talking,’ she says.

‘What about him in the attic?’ says Heloise, the youngest maid whose hands fold over her round stomach as she speaks. The stomach moves of its own accord and she pats it. ‘What about him in the attic?’ she says. ‘Shall we let him loose?’

Eleanor looks at the girl’s stomach. ‘You better get out of the way when the journalists come,’ she says. ‘Never mind him in the attic. They’ll be making inquiries of you. Wanting to know.’

‘Oh,’ says Heloise, holding her stomach. ‘It’s the quickening. I could faint.’ But she stands tall, placid and unfainting, gazing out of the window of the servants’ sitting-room.

'He was a very fine man in his way. The whole of Geneva got a great surprise.'

'Will get a surprise,' Eleanor says.

'Let us not split hairs,' says Lister, 'between the past, present and future tenses. I am agog for word from the porter's lodge. They should be arriving. Watch from the window.' And to the pregnant maid he says, 'Have you got out all the luggage?'

'Pablo has packed his bags already,' says Heloise, swivelling her big eyes over to the handyman with a slight turn of her body.

'Sensible,' says Lister.

'Pablo is the father,' Heloise declares, patting her stomach which quivers under her apron.

'I wouldn't be so sure of that,' Lister says. 'And neither would you.'

'Well it isn't the Baron,' says Heloise.

'No, it isn't the Baron,' says Lister.

'It isn't the Baron, that's for sure,' says Eleanor.

'The poor late Baron,' says Heloise.

'Precisely,' says Lister. 'He'll be turning up soon. In the Buick, I should imagine.'

Eleanor is putting on an apron. 'Where's my carrot juice? Go and ask Monsieur Clovis for my carrot juice. My eyes have improved since I went on carrot juice.'

'Clovis is busy with his contract,' Lister says. 'He left it rather late. I made mine with *Stern* and *Paris-Match* over a month ago. Now of course there's still the movie deal to consider, but you want to play it cool. Don't forget. Play it cool and sell to the highest bidder.'

Clovis looks up, irritably, from his papers. 'France, Germany, Italy, bid high. But don't forget in the long run that English is the higher-income language. We ought to coordinate on that point.' He continues his scrutiny of documents.

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‘Surely Monsieur Clovis is going to prepare a meal tonight, isn’t he?’ says Eleanor. She goes through the door to the kitchen. ‘Clovis!’ she calls. ‘Don’t forget my carrot juice, will you?’

‘Quiet!’ says Clovis. ‘I’m reading the small print. The small print in a contract is the important part. You can get your own damn carrot juice. There’s carrots in the vegetable store and there’s the blender in front of you. You all get your own supper tonight.’

‘What about them?’

‘They won’t be needing supper.’

Lister stands in the doorway, now, watching his young aunt routing among the vegetables for a few carrots which she presses between her fingers disapprovingly.

‘Supper, never again,’ says Lister. ‘For them, supper no more.’

‘These carrots are soft,’ says Eleanor. ‘Heloise doesn’t know how to market. She’s out of place in a house this style.’

‘The poor Baroness used to like her,’ says Clovis, looking up from the table where he is sitting studying the fine print. ‘The poor Baroness could see no wrong in Heloise.’

‘I see no wrong in her, either,’ Eleanor says. ‘I only say she doesn’t know how to buy carrots.’

Heloise comes to join them at the kitchen door.

‘It’s quickening,’ she informs Clovis.

‘Well it isn’t my fault,’ says the chef.

‘Nor me neither, Heloise,’ says Lister severely. ‘I always took precautions the times I went with you.’

‘It’s Pablo,’ says the girl, ‘I could swear to it. Pablo’s the father.’

‘It could have been one of the visitors,’ Lister says.

Clovis looks up from his papers, spread out as they are on the kitchen table. ‘The visitors never got Heloise, never.’

'There were one or two,' says Heloise, reflectively. 'But it's day and night with Pablo when he's in the mood. After breakfast, even.' She looks at her stomach as if to discern by a kind of X-ray eye who the father truly might be. 'There was a visitor or two,' she says. 'I must say, there did happen to be a visitor or two about the time I caught on. Either a visitor of the Baroness or a visitor of the Baron.'

'We have serious business on hand tonight, my girl, so shut up,' says the chef. 'We have business to discuss and plenty to do. Quite a vigil. Has anybody arrived yet?'

'Eleanor, I say keep a look out of the window,' Lister orders his aunt. 'You never know when someone might leave their car out on the road and slip in. They're careless down at the lodge.'

Eleanor cranes her neck towards the window, still feeling the soft carrots with a contemptuous touch. 'Here comes Hadrian; it's only Hadrian coming up the drive. These carrots are past it. Terrible carrots.'

The footsteps crunch to the back of the house. Hadrian the assistant chef comes in with a briefcase under his arm.

'Did you get out my cabin trunk?' he asks Heloise.

'It's too big, in my condition.'

'Well get Pablo to fetch it, quick. I'm going to start my packing.'

'What about him in the attic?' says Heloise. 'We better take him up his supper or he might create or take one of his turns.'

'Of course he'll get his supper. It's early yet.'

'Suppose the Baron wants his dinner?'

'Of course he expected his dinner,' Lister says. 'But as things turned out he didn't live to eat it. He'll be arriving soon.'

'There might be an unexpected turn of events,' says Eleanor.

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‘There was sure to be something unexpected,’ says Lister. ‘But what’s done is about to be done and the future has come to pass. My memoirs up to the funeral are as a matter of fact more or less complete. At all events, it’s out of our hands. I place the event at about three a.m. so prepare to stay awake.’

‘I would say six o’clock tomorrow morning. Right on the squeak of dawn,’ says Heloise.

‘You might well be right,’ says Lister. ‘Women in your condition are unusually intuitive.’

‘How it kicks!’ says Heloise with her hand on her stomach. ‘Do you know something? I have a craving for grapes. Do we have any grapes? A great craving. Should I get a tray ready for him in the attic?’

‘Rather early,’ says Lister looking at the big moon-faced kitchen clock. ‘It’s only ten past six. Get your clothes packed.’

The large windowed wall of the servants’ hall looks out on a gravelled courtyard and beyond that, the cold mountains, already lost in the early darkening of autumn.

A dark green, small car has parked here by the side entrance. The servants watch. Two women sit inside, one at the wheel and one in the back seat. They do not speak. A tall person has just left the other front seat and has come round to the front door.

Lister waits for the bell to ring and when it does he goes to open the door:

A long-locked young man, fair, wearing a remarkable white fur coat which makes his pink skin somewhat radiant. The coat reaches to his boots.

Lister acknowledges by a slight smile, in which he uses his mouth only, that he recognizes the caller well from previous visits. ‘Sir?’ says Lister.

'The Baroness,' says the young man, in the quiet voice of one who does not wish to spend much of it.

'She is not at home. Will you wait, sir?' Lister stands aside to make way at the door.

'Yes, she's expecting me. Is the Baron in?' sounds the low voice of the young man.

'We expect him back for dinner, sir. He should be in shortly.'

Lister takes the white fur coat glancing at the quality and kind of mink, and at its lining and label as he does so. Lister, with the coat over his arm, turns to the left, crosses the oval hall, followed by the young man. Lister treads across the *trompe-l'œil* chequered paving of the hall and the young man follows. He wears a coat of deep blue satin with darker blue watered silk lapels, trousers of dark blue velvet, a pale mauve satin shirt with a very large high collar and a white cravat fixed with an amethyst pin. Lister opens a door and stands aside. The young man, as he enters, says politely to Lister, 'In the left-hand outer pocket, this time, Lister.'

'Thank you, sir,' says Lister, as he withdraws. He closes the door again and crosses the oval hall to another door. He opens it, hangs the white mink coat gently on one of a long line of coat-hangers which are placed expectantly in order on a carved rack. Lister then feels in the outer left-hand pocket of the coat, withdraws a fat, squat, brown envelope, opens it with a forefinger, half-pulls out a bundle of bank-notes, calculates them with his eyes, stuffs them back into the envelope, and places the envelope in one of his own pockets, somewhere beneath his white jacket, at heart-level. Lister looks at himself in the glass above the wash-basin and looks away. He arranges the neat unused hand-towels with the crested 'K' even more neatly, and leaves the cloak-room.

The other servants fall silent as Lister returns.

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‘Number One,’ says Lister. ‘He walked to his death most gingerly.’

‘Sex,’ muses Heloise.

Lister shudders, ‘The forbidden word,’ he says. ‘Let me not hear you say it again.’

‘It’s Victor Passerat, waiting there in the library,’ says Heloise.

‘Mister Fair-locks,’ says Eleanor, looking at the carrot juice which she has prepared with the blender.

‘I never went with him,’ says Heloise. ‘I had the chance, though.’

‘Didn’t we all?’ says Pablo.

‘Speak for yourself,’ says Clovis.

‘Less talk,’ says Lister.

‘Victor Passerat isn’t the dad,’ says Heloise.

‘He’d never have had it in him,’ says Pablo.

‘Are you aware,’ says Eleanor to her nephew, ‘that two ladies are waiting outside in the car that brought the visitor?’

Lister glances towards the window but next he goes to a large cupboard and, drawing up a chair, mounts it. He carefully, one by one, removes the neat jars of preserved fruit that are stacked there, ginger in gin, cherries in cognac, apple and pineapple, marmalades of several types, some of them capped and bottled with a home-made look, others, according to their shapes and labels, fetched in from as far as Fortnum and Mason in London and Charles’s in New York. All these Lister carefully places on a side-table, assisted by Eleanor and watched by the others in a grave silence evidently due to the occasion. Lister removes a plank shelf, now bare of bottles. At the back of the cupboard is a wall-safe, the lock of which Lister slowly and respectfully opens, although not yet the door. He demands a pen, and while waiting for Hadrian the assistant cook to fetch it, he takes the envelope from

his inner pocket, and counts the bank-notes in full view of the rest.

'Small change,' he says, 'compared with what is to come, or has already come, according as one's philosophy is temporal or eternal. To all intents and purposes, they're already dead although as a matter of banal fact, the night's business has still to accomplish itself.'

'Lister's in good vein tonight,' says Clovis, who has left the perusal of his contract to join the group. Meanwhile Hadrian returns, handing up the simple ballpoint pen to Lister.

Upstairs the shutters bang.

'The wind is high tonight,' Lister says. 'We might not hear the shots.' He takes the pen and marks a sum on the envelope, followed by the date. He then opens wide the safe which is neatly stacked with various envelopes and boxes, some of metal, some of leather. He places the new package among the rest, closes the safe, replaces the wooden shelf, and, assisted by Eleanor and Heloise, puts the preserve-bottles back in their places. He descends from his chair, hands the chair to Hadrian, closes the cupboard door, and goes to the window. 'Yes,' he says, 'two ladies waiting in the car, as well they might. Good night, ladies. Good night, sweet, sweet, ladies.'

'Why did they pull up round the side instead of waiting in the drive?' says Heloise.

'The answer,' says Lister, 'is that they know their place. They had the courage to accompany their kinsman on his errand, but at the last little moment, lacked the style which alone was necessary to save him. The Baron will arrive, and not see them, not inquire. Likewise the Baroness. No sense, for all their millions.'

'With all that in there alone,' says Heloise, still contemplating the closed cupboard wherein lies the wall-safe of treasure, 'we could buy the Montreux Palace Hotel.'

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‘Who needs the Montreux Palace?’ says Hadrian.

‘Think big,’ says Pablo the handyman, patting her around the belly.

‘How it kicks!’ she says.

‘How like,’ says Lister, ‘the death wish is to the life-urge! How urgently does an overwhelming obsession with life lead to suicide! Really, it’s best to be half-awake and half-aware. That is the happiest stage.’

‘The Baron Klopstocks were obsessed with sex,’ says Eleanor. She is setting places at the long servants’ table.

‘Sex is not to be mentioned,’ Lister says. ‘To do so would be to belittle their activities. On their sphere sex is nothing but an overdose of life. They will die of it, or rather, to all intents and purposes, have died. We treat of spontaneous combustion. One remove from sex, as in Henry James, an English American who travelled.’

‘They die of violence,’ says Clovis who has transferred to the butler’s desk his papers and the contract and documents he has been studying closely for the past three-quarters of an hour. He sits with his back to the others, looks half over his shoulders. ‘To be precise, it is of violence that they shortly die.’

‘Clovis,’ says Eleanor, ‘would you mind giving an eye to the oven?’

‘Where’s my assistant?’ says Clovis.

‘Hadrian has gone down to the lodge,’ says Eleanor. ‘Gone to borrow a couple of eggs. Him in the attic hasn’t had his supper yet.’

‘No eggs in the house?’ says Clovis.

‘There was too much else to arrange today,’ says Eleanor as she places five tiny silver bowls of salt at regular intervals along the table, carefully measuring the distance with her eye. ‘No marketing done.’

'Things have gone to rack and ruin,' says Lister, 'now that the crisis has arrived. This house hitherto was run like the solar system.'

'Cook your own damn dinner,' says Clovis, bending closely over his documents.

'Don't you want any?' says Heloise. 'I'll eat your share if you like, Clovis. I'm eating for two.'

Clovis bangs down his fist, drops his pen, goes across to the large white complicated cooking stove, studies the regulator, turns the dial, opens the stove door, and while looking inside, with the other hand snaps his finger. Heloise runs with a cloth and a spoon and places them in Clovis's hand. Protecting his hand with the cloth Clovis partly pulls out a casserole dish. He hooks up the lid with the handle of the spoon, peers in, sniffs, replaces the lid, shoves the dish back and closes the oven door. Again, he turns the dial of the regulator. Then with the spoon-handle, he lifts the lids from the two pots which are simmering on top of the stove. He glances inside each and replaces the lids.

'Fifteen minutes more for the casserole. In seven minutes you move the pots aside. We sit down at half-past seven if we're lucky and they don't decide to dine before they die.'

'No they won't eat,' says Lister. 'We can have our dinner in peace while they get on with the job.'

From somewhere far away at the top of the house comes a howl and a clatter.

'I'll have a vodka and tonic,' says Clovis, as he passes through the big kitchen and returns to his papers at the butler's desk.

'Very good,' says Lister, looking round. 'Any more orders?'

'Nothing for me. I had my carrot juice. I couldn't stomach a sherry, not tonight,' says Eleanor.

'Nerves,' says Lister, and has started to leave the kitchen when the house-telephone rings. He returns to answer it.

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‘Lister here,’ he says, and listens briefly while something in the telephone crackles into the room. ‘Very good,’ he then says into the telephone and hangs up. ‘The Baron,’ says he, ‘has arrived.’

The Baron’s great car moves away from the porter’s lodge while the porter closes the gates behind it. It slightly swerves to avoid Hadrian who is walking up the drive.

The porter, returning to the lodge, finds his wife hanging up the house-telephone in the cold hall. ‘Lister sounds like himself,’ she tells her husband.

‘What the hell do you expect him to sound like?’ says the porter. ‘How should he sound?’

‘He was no different from usual,’ she says. ‘Oh, I feel terrible.’

‘Nothing’s going to happen, dear,’ he says, suddenly hugging her. ‘Nothing at all.’

‘I can feel it in the air, like electricity,’ she says. He takes her arm, urging her into the warm sitting-room. She is young and small. She looks as if she were steady of mind but she says, ‘I think I am going mad.’

‘Clara!’ says the porter. ‘Clara!’

She says, ‘Last night I had a terrible dream.’

Cecil Klopstock, the Baron, has arrived at his door, thin and wavering. The door is open and Lister stands by it.

‘The Baroness?’ says the Baron, passively departing from his coat which slides over Lister’s arm.

‘No, sir, she hasn’t arrived. Mr Passerat is waiting.’

‘When did he come?’

‘About half-past six, sir.’

‘Anyone with him?’

‘Two women in the car. They’re waiting outside.’

'Let them wait,' says the Baron and goes towards the library, across the black and white paving of the hall. He hesitates, half-turns, then says, 'I'll wash in here,' evidently referring to a wash-room adjoining the library.

'I thought it best,' Lister says as he enters the servants' sitting-room, 'to tell him about those two women waiting outside, perceiving as I did from his manner that he had already noticed them. – "Anyone with Mr Passerat?" he said with his eye to me. "Yes, sir," I said, "two ladies. They are waiting in the car." Why he asked me that redundant question I'll never know.'

'He was testing you out,' says Hadrian who is whisking two eggs in a bowl.

'Yes, that's what I think, too,' says Lister. 'I feel wounded. I opened the door of the library. Passerat got up. The Baron said "Good evening, Victor" and Passerat said "Good evening." Whereupon, being unwanted, I respectfully withdrew. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*'

'They will be sitting down having a drink,' says Pablo who has cleaned himself up and is now regarding his hair from a distance in the oval looking-glass. This way and that he turns his head, with its hair shiny-black.

'Didn't he ask for more ice?' says Eleanor. 'They never have enough ice.'

'They have plenty of ice in the drinks cupboard. I filled the ice-box, myself, and put more on refrigeration this afternoon when you were all busy with your telephoning and personal arrangements,' Lister says. 'They have ice. All they need now is the Baroness.'

'Oh, she'll come, don't worry,' says Clovis, stacking his papers neatly.

'I wish she'd hurry,' says Heloise, as she slumps in a puffy cretonned armchair. 'I want to eat my dinner in peace.'

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Hadrian has prepared a tray on which he has placed a dish of scrambled eggs, a plate of thin toasted buttered bread, a large cup and saucer and a silver thermos-container of some beverage. Eleanor, with vague movements, leaves her table-setting to place on the tray a knife, a fork and a spoon; then she covers the toast and the eggs with silver plate-covers.

‘What are you doing?’ says Hadrian, grabbing the knife and fork off the tray. ‘What’s come over you?’

‘Oh, I forgot,’ says Eleanor. ‘I’ve been in a state all day.’ She replaces the knife and fork with one large spoon.

Lister goes to the house-telephone, lifts the receiver and presses a button. Presently the instrument wheezes. ‘Supper on its way up to him in the attic,’ says Lister. ‘Yours will follow later.’

The instrument wheezes again.

‘We’ll keep you informed,’ says Lister. ‘All you have to do is stay there till we tell you not to.’ He hangs up. ‘Sister Barton is worried,’ he says. ‘Him in the attic is full of style this evening and likely to worsen as the night draws on. Another case of intuition.’

Hadrian takes the tray in his hands and as he leaves the room he asks, ‘Shall I tell Sister Barton to call the doctor?’

‘Leave it to Sister Barton,’ says Lister, gloomily, with his eyes on other thoughts. ‘Leave it to her.’

Heloise says, ‘I can manage him in the attic myself, if it comes to that. I’ve always been good to him in the attic.’

‘You better get some sleep after you’ve had your supper, my girl,’ says Clovis. ‘You’ve got a big night ahead. The reporters will be here in the morning if not before.’

‘It might not take place till six-ish in the morning,’ says Heloise. ‘Once they start arguing it could drag on all night. I’m intuitive, as Mr Lister says, and –’

'Only as regards your condition,' says Lister. 'Normally, you are not a bit intuitive. You're thick, normally. It's merely that in your condition the Id tends to predominate over the Ego.'

'I have to be humoured,' says Heloise, shutting her eyes. 'Why can't I have some grapes?'

'Give her some grapes,' says Pablo.

'Not before dinner,' says Clovis.

'Clara!' says Theo the porter. 'Clara!'

'It's only that I'm burning with desire to ask them what's going on up at the house tonight,' she says.

'Come back here. Come right back, darling,' he says, drawing her into the sitting-room where the fire glows and flares behind the fender. 'Desire,' he says.

'Theo!' she says.

'You and your nightmares,' Theo says. He shuts the door of the sitting-room and sits beside her on the sofa, absent-mindedly plucking her thigh while he stares at the dancing fire. 'You and your dreams.'

Clara says, 'There's nothing in it for us. We were better off at the Ritz in Madrid.'

'Now, now. We're doing better here. We're doing much better here. Lister is very generous. Lister is very, very generous.' Theo picks up the poker and turns a coal on the fire, making it flare, while Clara swings her legs up on to the sofa. 'Theo,' she says, 'did I tell you Hadrian came down here to borrow a couple of eggs?'

'And what else, Clara,' says Theo. 'What else?'

'Nothing,' she says. 'Just the eggs.'

'I can't turn my back but he's down here,' says Theo. 'I'll report him to the Baron tomorrow morning.' He goes to draw the window-curtains. 'And Clovis,' he says, 'for not keeping an eye on him.' Theo returns to the sofa.

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Clara screams 'No, no, I've changed my mind,' and pushes him away. She ties up her cord-trimmed dressing-gown.

'Not so much of it, Clara,' says Theo. 'All this yes-no. I could have the Baroness if I want. Any minute of the hour. Any hour of the day.'

'Oh, it's you that makes me dream these terrible things, Theo,' she says. 'When you talk like that, on and on about the Baroness, with her grey hair. You should be ashamed.'

'She's got grey hair all places,' Theo says, 'from all accounts.'

'If I was a man,' says Clara, 'I'd be sick at the thought.'

'Well, from all accounts, I'd sooner sleep with her than a dead policeman,' says Theo.

'Hark, there's a car on the road. It must be her,' says Clara. But Theo is not harking. She plucks at his elastic braces and says, 'A disgrace that they didn't have an egg in the house for the idiot-boy's supper. Something must be happening up there. I've felt it all week, haven't you, Theo?'

Theo has no words, his breath being concentrated by now on Clara alone. She says, 'And there's the car drawing up, Theo – it's stopped at the gate. Theo, you'd better go.'

He draws back from his wife for the split second which it takes him to say, 'Shut up.'

'I can hear the honking at the gate,' she says in a loud voice – 'Don't you hear her sounding the horn? All week in my dreams I've heard the honking at the gate.' Theo grunts.

The car honks twice and Theo now puts on his coat and pulls himself together with the dignity of a man who does one thing at a time in due order. He goes to the hall, takes the keys from the table drawer and walks forth into the damp air to open the gate beyond which a modest cream coupé is honking still.

It pulls up at the porter's lodge after it has been admitted. The square-faced woman at the wheel is the only occupant.

She lets down the window and says, cheerfully, 'How are you, Theo?'

'Very well, thanks, Madam. Sorry to keep you waiting, Madam. There was a question of eggs for the poor gentleman in the attic, his supper.'

She smiles charmingly from under her great fur hat.

'Everything goes wrong when I'm away, doesn't it? And how is Clara, is she enjoying this little house?'

'Oh yes, Madam, we're very happy in this job,' says Theo. 'We're settling in nicely.'

'You'll get used to our ways, Theo.'

'Well, Madam, we've had plenty of experience behind us, Clara and me. So we've shaken down here nicely.' He shivers, standing in the cold night, bareheaded in his porter's uniform.

'Your *rapport* with the servants – is that all right?' gently inquires the Baroness.

Theo hesitates, then opens his mouth to speak. But the Baroness puts in, 'Your relationship with them? You get on all right with them?'

'Oh yes, Madam. Perfectly, Madam. Thanks.' He steps back a little pace, as if only too ready to withdraw quickly into the warm cottage.

The Baroness makes no move to put her thick-gloved hand on the wheel. She says, 'I'm so very glad. Among servants of such mixed nationalities, it's very difficult sometimes to achieve harmony. Indeed, we're one of the few places in the country that has a decent-sized staff. I don't know what the Baron and I would do without you all.'

Theo crosses his arms and clutches each opposite sleeve of his coat just below the shoulders, like an isolated body quivering in its own icy sphere. He says, 'You'll be glad to get in the house tonight, Madam. Wind coming across the lake.'

'You must be feeling the cold,' she says, and starts up the car.

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‘Good night, Madam.’

‘Good night.’

He backs into the porchway of the cottage, then quickly turns to push open the door. In the hall he lifts the house-telephone and waits for a few seconds, still shivering, till it comes alive. ‘The Baroness,’ he says, then. ‘Just arrived. Anybody else expected?’

The speaker from the kitchen at the big house says something briefly and clicks off. ‘What?’ says Theo to the dead instrument. Then he hangs up, runs out of the front door and closes the big gates. He returns as rapidly to the warm sitting-room where Clara is lying dreamily on the sofa, one arm draped along its back and another drooping over the edge. ‘You waiting for the photographer?’ says Theo.

‘What was all that talk?’ Clara says.

‘Shivering out there. She was in her car, of course, didn’t feel it. On and on. Asked after you. She says, are we happy here?’

Pablo has got into the little cream coupé and driven it away from the front of the house as soon as Lister has helped the Baroness out of it, taken her parcels, banged shut the car door, and followed her up the steps and into the hall.

‘Here,’ she says, pulling off her big fur hat in front of the hall mirror. Lister takes it while she roughs up her curly grey hair. She slips off her tweed coat, picks up her handbag and says, ‘Where’s everyone?’

‘The Baron is in the library, Madam, with Mr Passerat.’

‘Good,’ she says, and gives another hand to her hair. Then she pulls at her skirt, thick at the waist and hips, and says, ‘Tell Irene I’ll be up to change in half-an-hour.’

‘Irene’s off tonight, Madam.’

‘Heloise, is she here?’

'Yes, Madam.'

'Still working? Is she fit and well?'

'Oh, she's all right, Madam. I'll tell her to go and prepare for you.'

'Only if she's feeling up to it,' says the Baroness. 'I think the world of Heloise,' she says, stumping heavily to the library door which she opens before Lister can reach it, pausing before she enters to turn to Lister while the voices within suddenly stop. 'Lister,' she says, standing in the doorway. 'Theo and Clara – they have to go. I'm so very sorry but I need the little house for one of my cousins. We don't really need a porter. I leave it to you, Lister.'

'Well, Madam, it's a delicate matter at the moment. They won't be expecting this.'

'I know, I know. Arrange something to make it easy, Lister. The Baron and I would be so grateful.' Then she throws open the door somewhat dramatically and walks in, while the two men get up from the grey leather armchairs. Lister waits in the room, by the door.

'Nothing, thanks, Lister,' says the Baron. 'We have everything here for the moment.' He waves towards the drinks cupboard in a preoccupied way. The Baroness flops into a sofa while Lister, about to leave the room, is halted by the Baron's afterthought – 'Lister, if anyone calls, we aren't on any account to be disturbed.' The Baron looks at the ormolu and blue enamelled clock, and then at his own wristwatch. 'We don't want to be disturbed by anyone whomsoever.' Lister moves his lips and head compliantly and leaves.

'They haunt the house,' says Lister, 'like insubstantial bodies, while still alive. I think we have a long wait in front of us.' He takes his place at the head of the table. 'He said on no account to disturb them. "Not to be disturbed, Lister." You should

have seen the look on her face. My mind floats about, catching at phantoms and I think of the look on her face. I am bound to ventilate this impression or I won't digest my supper.'

'Not a bad woman,' says Pablo.

'She likes to keep grace and favour in her own hands,' Lister says, 'and leave disagreeable matters to others. "The couple at the lodge has to go, Lister," she said, "I rely on you to tell them. I need the lodge for my cousins," or was it "my cousin"? – one, two, three, I don't know. The point is she wants the lodge for them.'

'How many cousins can she possibly have?' says Eleanor, looking at the clean prongs of her fork, for some reason, before making them coincide with a morsel of veal. 'And all the secretaries besides.'

'Cousins uncountable, secretaries perhaps fewer,' says Lister, 'if only she had survived to enjoy them. As it is the lodge will probably be vacated anyhow. No need for me to speak to the poor silly couple.'

'You never know,' says Heloise.

'Listen! – I hear a noise,' says Pablo.

'The shutters banging upstairs,' says Hadrian.

'No, it's him in the attic, throwing his supper plates around,' Heloise says.

'It wasn't plates, it was a banging,' Pablo says. 'There it goes. Listen.'

'Eat on,' says Clovis. 'It's only the couple of ladies in the car again. They're getting impatient.'

'Why don't they ring?' says Lister as he listens to the thumping on the back door.

'I disconnected the back door bell,' Clovis says. 'We need our meal in peace. Since I was goaded to do most of the cooking it's my say that goes. Nobody leaves the table before their supper's over.'

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'Suppose one of them in the library rings for us?' Eleanor says.

Lister reaches out for his wine-glass and sips from it. The banging at the door continues. Clovis says, 'It's doubtful if they will call us, now. However, we must no longer respond, it would be out of the question. To put it squarely, as I say in my memoir, the eternal triangle has come full circle.'

'They've as good as gone to Kingdom Come,' says Lister. 'However, it is I who decides whether or not we answer any summons, hypothetical or otherwise.'

'It's Lister who decides,' says his aunt Eleanor.

II

IT IS TEN-THIRTY AT NIGHT. Lister has changed his clothes and so has his young aunt, Eleanor. They walk hand-in-hand up the swirling great staircase with its filigree of Regency wrought-iron banisters, imported in their time as were so many other appointments of the house. Lister flicks on the light and opens the folding doors of the Klopstocks' long drawing-room, allowing Eleanor to pass before him into the vastness with its curtains looped along the row of French windows. Outside is a balustrade and beyond that the night. The parquet glitters obliquely, not having been trodden on today. The blue and shrimp-pink of the carpet, the pinks and browns of the tapestried chairs, the little tables, the scrolled flat desk and the porcelain vases are spread around Lister and Eleanor, as they enter the room, like standing waiters on the arrival of the first guests at an official reception. A porcelain snow-white lamb, artfully woolly, sleeps peacefully on the mantelpiece where the Baron placed it eleven years ago when the house was built and his precious goods brought in. The Adam mantelpiece at one end of the room came through the Swiss customs along with the rest as did the twin mantelpiece in the ante-room at the other end. Eleanor, wearing a grey woollen dress and carrying a black bag, sits down gracefully on a wide, upholstered chair and leans her arms on a small table, toying with the pink-blond carnation she herself arranged freshly this morning.

She looks about thirty-four. Her nephew, Lister, well advanced into his mid-forties. He wears a dark business suit with a white shirt and a dull red tie. They could be anybody, and more conceivably could be the master and mistress of the house just returned at this time of night from a trip to a city – Paris or even Geneva – or just about to leave for an airport, a night flight. Eleanor's hair is short, curled and dull. Lister's gleams with dark life. Their faces are long and similar. Lister sits opposite Eleanor and looks at a part of the wall that is covered with miniature portraits. Many objects in this large room are on a miniature scale. There are no large pictures, such as would fit it. The Monet is one of the smaller scale, and so is the Goya. So too are a group of what appear to be family portraits, so that it seems as if the inclination towards the miniature is either a trait descending throughout a few generations to their present owner, or else these little portraits have been cleverly copied, more recently, from some more probable larger originals. Ornamental keys, enamelled snuff-boxes and bright coins stand by on the small tables.

Lister looks away from the wall, and straight at Eleanor. 'My dear,' he says.

She says, 'I hear their voices.'

'They are still alive,' says Lister. 'I'm sure of that. It hasn't happened yet.'

'It's going to happen,' she says.

'Oh, my dear, it's inevitable.' He takes a cigarette from the long silver box and lights it with the table lighter. Then he raises a finger for silence, as if Eleanor had been making a noise, which she had not. 'Listen!' he says. 'They're arguing in high tone. Eleanor, you're right!'

Eleanor takes from her bag a long steel nail-file, gets up, goes to a corner of the carpet, raises it, kneels, then with the file dislodges a loose piece of parquet.

‘Softly and swiftly, my love.’

She looks up. ‘Don’t be so smart. This isn’t the time to lark about.’ She bends to dislodge another, and moving backward a little, knee by knee, leans forward on her elbows and places her ear to the planks of dusty common wood beneath the parquet.

‘Eleanor, it isn’t worthy of you,’ he says. ‘You look like a parlour maid. A minute ago you didn’t.’

She listens hard, looking upward through space to the high ceiling as if in a trance. Every little while a wave of indistinct voices from below reaches the drawing-room, one shrill, another shrill, then all together, excited. From a floor above, somebody bangs and the sound is repeated, with voices and a scuffle. Eleanor raises her head and says, exasperated, ‘With him in the attic barking again and banging, and you carrying on, it’s impossible to hear properly what’s being said below. Why didn’t Sister Barton give him his injection?’

‘I don’t know,’ he says, leaning back with his cigarette. ‘I’m sure I advised her to. This parquet flooring once belonged to a foreign king. He had to flee his throne. He took the parquet of his palace with him, also the door-knobs. Royalty always do, when they have to leave. They take everything, like stage-companies who need their props. With royalty, of course, it all is largely a matter of stage production. And lighting. Royalty are very careful about their setting and their lighting. As is the Pope. The Baron resembled royalty and the Pope in that respect at least. Parquet flooring and door-handles. The Baron bought them all in a lot with the house when the old king passed away. They definitely came from the royal palace.’

‘All I heard from down there,’ says Eleanor, putting the oblongs of palace parquet back in place and rising, while she folds back the carpet over them, ‘was something like “You said . . .”

– “No you did not. I said . . .” – “No, you did say . . .” – “When in hell did I say . . .” That means they’re going over it all, Lister. It could take all night.’

‘Heloise said it could be around six in the morning,’ Lister remarks as Eleanor stands flicking her skirt against the strange event that it has gathered fluff or dust. ‘Not,’ he says, ‘that I normally take any interest in Heloise’s words. But she’s in an interesting condition. They get good at guessing when they’re in that state.’

Eleanor is back in her chair again. Down at the back door there is a noise loud enough to reach this quiet room. A banging. A demand. At the same time, at the front door the bell shrills.

‘I hope someone answers that door before the Baroness gets it in her head to go and answer it herself,’ says Eleanor. ‘Any break in the meeting might distract them from the quarrel and side-track the climax, wouldn’t you think?’

‘The Baron said not to disturb,’ says Lister, ‘as if to say, nobody leaves the room till we’ve had a clarification, let the tension mount as it may. And that’s final. She’ll never leave the library.’

‘Well, they must be getting hungry. They’ve had nothing to eat.’

‘Let them eat cake,’ says Lister, and he adds,

‘Think, in this battered Caravanserai
Whose doorways are alternate Night and Day,
How Sultan after Sultan with his Pomp
Abode his Hour or two, and went his way.’

Eleanor says, ‘It’s true they’ve had some important visitors.’

‘The adjective “battered”,’ Lister says, looking round the quiet expanse of drawing-room, ‘I apply in the elastic sense.

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Also “caravanserai” I use loosely. The house is more like a Swiss hotel, which you may be sure it will become. But endless caravans, so to speak, have most certainly come and gone here, they have come, they have stopped over, they have gone. I’m fairly to the point. It will make a fine hotel. Put different furniture into it, and you have a hotel.’

‘Lister,’ she says, ‘you’re always so wonderful. There could never be anyone else in my life.’

He says, rising to approach her, ‘Aunt to me though you are, would you marry me outside the Book of Common Prayer?’

She says, ‘I have my scruples and I’m proud of them.’

He says, ‘In France an aunt may marry a nephew.’

‘No, Lister, I stand by the Table of Kindred and Affinity. I don’t want to get heated at this moment, on this night, Lister. You’re starting me off. The press and the police are coming, and there are only sixty-four shopping days to Christmas.’

‘I was only suggesting,’ he says. ‘I’m only giving you a little thought for when all this is over.’

‘It’s going too far. You have to keep your unreasonable demands within bounds. I’m old-fashioned beyond my years. One thought at a time is what I like.’

‘Let’s go down,’ says Lister, ‘and see what the servants are up to.’

As they come down the staircase voices rebound from the library. Lister and Eleanor continue silently and, turning into the servants’ hall, Lister stops and looks at the library door. ‘What were they doing anyway, amongst us, on the crust of this tender earth?’ he says. ‘What were they doing here?’

The other servants fall silent. ‘What are they doing here, anyway in this world?’

Heloise, pink and white of skin, fresh from her little sleep, says, ‘Doing their own thing.’

'They haven't finished it yet,' says Clovis. 'I'm getting anxious. Listen to their voices.'

'There must have been some good in them,' Eleanor says. 'They couldn't have been all bad.'

'Oh, I agree. They did wrong well. And they were good for a purpose so long as they lasted,' Lister says. 'As paper cups are suitable for occasions, you use them and throw them away. Who brought that fur coat in here?' He points to a white mink coat draped over a chair.

'It looks a dream on me,' Heloise says. 'It doesn't meet at the front, but afterwards it will.'

'You'd better put it back. Victor Passerat's been seen in it,' Lister says. 'The police will inquire.'

Heloise takes away the coat and says, as she goes, 'I'll get it in the end. Somehow I feel I'll get it in the end.'

'She might well be right,' Lister says. 'Her foresight runs high at this moment. Who were those people banging at the back door and ringing at the front?'

'The girls in the car, demanding what's happened to their friend, Passerat,' Hadrian says. 'I told them that he was with the Baron and Baroness and they were not to be disturbed. They said they had an appointment. One of them's a masseuse that I haven't seen before.'

'And the other?' says Lister.

'The other didn't say. I didn't ask.'

'You did right,' Lister says. 'They don't come into the story.'

Outside are the sounds of the lake-water lapping on the jetty and of the mountain-wind in the grandiose trees. The couple in the car are separated, one in the front, one in the back seat, each lolling under a rug. They seem to be sleeping but every now and then one of them moves, one of them speaks, and again their heads bend and the blankets move over their

crouched uneasy shoulders. The lights from the house and from the distant drive touch on their movements.

They both start upright as another car, dark and large, pulls up. A lithe, leather-coated young man sprints out and approaches the couple. They are scrambling out of their car now.

‘We can’t get in the house,’ says the one from the front seat. ‘They won’t open the door, even. We’ve been here over three hours, waiting for our friend.’

‘What friend? What do you want?’ says the lithe young man, impatiently jangling a bunch of keys. ‘I’m the secretary, Mr Samuel. Tell me what you want.’

The other friend of Victor Passerat replies, ‘Victor Passerat. We’re waiting for him. It’s serious. He had an appointment with the Baroness and with the Baron, and –’

‘Just a minute,’ says Mr Samuel, looking closely at the second friend, ‘just a minute. You sound like a man.’

‘I am a man.’

‘All right. I thought you were a girl.’

‘That’s only my clothes. My friend here’s a woman. I’m Alex – she’s a masseuse.’

‘My name’s Anne,’ states the masseuse, stockily regarding Mr Samuel’s bunch of keys. ‘Do you have the keys to the house?’

‘I certainly do,’ says Mr Samuel.

‘Well, we want to know what’s going on,’ says the woman.

‘We’re worried, quite frankly,’ says her young friend.

Mr Samuel places a gentle hand on the shoulders of each. ‘Don’t you think,’ he says, ‘that it would be more advisable for you to go away and let nature take its course? Go away, quietly and without fuss; just go away and play the piano, or something. Take a soothing nightcap, both of you, and forget about Passerat.’

From an upper room comes a sound like a human bark followed by an owl-scream.

Anne the masseuse adds a further cry to the night. 'Open that door,' she screams and running to the back door beats her heavy shoulder against it, banging with her fists as well.

Mr Samuel winds his way to her with pleasant-mannered authority. 'That was only the invalid,' he says. 'The nurse has probably bitten his finger again. You would do the same, I'm sure, if one of your patients attempted to place his hand over your mouth for some reason.'

Anne's friend, Alex, calls out, 'Come on back in the car, Anne. It might be dangerous.'

Mr Samuel is touching her elbow, urging her back to their small car. 'There's nothing in it for you,' he is saying. 'Go home and forget it.'

The masseuse is large but she appears to have very little moral resistance. She starts to cry, with huge baby-sobs, while her companion, Alex, his square bony face framed in a silk head-scarf and his eyes pleadingly laden with make-up under finely shaped eyebrows, puts out a bony hand to touch her face. 'Come back in the car, Anne,' he says, giving Mr Samuel a look of hurt umbrage.

Anne turns on Mr Samuel. 'Who made you the secretary?' she says. 'Victor Passerat has been secretary since June.'

'Please,' says Mr Samuel. 'I didn't say he wasn't secretary. I only say I'm the secretary in residence. There are I don't know how many secretaries. Victor is only one of the many and it's only just unfortunate that this appointment between him and the Baron Klopstocks should keep you hanging around outside the house on a cold night. Just go home. Put on a record.'

'Is everything going to be all right?' Anne says. Alex has got into the car waiting for her. Anne gets in and puts her hands on the wheel without certainty. She looks at Alex as if

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for guidance. Meanwhile Mr Samuel has flicked himself in a graceful and preoccupied way to the back door of the house and now selects a key.

The couple in the car stare after him and he gives them one more glance; he lets himself in and quietly closes the door upon them. They drive off, then, up the long avenue, round the winding drive, past the lawns which in summer lie luminously green and spread on the one hand towards the swimming-pool in its very blue basin, and on the other towards the lily-pond, the animal-shaped yews, the fountains and the sunken rose garden. Behind them, and beyond the darkness, twinkles the back of the house – a few slits of light peppering its whole length – and behind that again, in the further darkness, the sloping terraces leading to the Lake of Geneva where the boats are moored and the water stretches across to the mountain shore. The little dark green car, leaving it all behind, reaches the lodge. Anne sounds the horn. Theo, wrapped up, now, in a heavy coat, stands evidently forewarned; he unlocks the gate and swings it wide.

When they have reached the main road and are off, he goes indoors; there he writes down the number of their car on a scribbling block which he has set out ready in the hall.

His wife stands by in her cord-trimmed dressing-gown. ‘Why are you doing that?’ she says.

‘I don’t know, Clara. But seeing I’ve been told to expect an all-night spell of duty without any relief-man, I’ve been taking a note of all numbers. I don’t know, Clara, I really don’t know why.’ He tears off the sheet and crumples it, tossing it on the sitting-room fire.

‘What’s wrong with the relief-men tonight?’ Clara says. ‘Where’s Conrad, where’s Bernard, where’s Jean-Albert, where’s Stephen? Why don’t they send Pablo, what’s he doing with them up there at the house? My sleep is terrible, how can I sleep?’

'I'm a simple man,' says Theo, 'and your dreams give me the jitters, but setting all that aside I smell a crisis. The Baroness hasn't been playing the game, and that's about it. Why did she let herself go to rack and ruin? They say she was a fine-looking woman a year ago. Lovely specimen.'

'She used to keep her hair frosted or blond-streaked,' Clara whispers. 'She shouldn't have let go her shape. Why did she suddenly start to go natural? She must have started to be sincere with someone.'

'Don't be frightened, Clara. Don't be afraid.'

'It's true what I say, Theo. She changed all of a sudden. I showed you her in the magazines in her ski-outfit. Wasn't she magnificent?'

'Go to bed, Clara. I say, go up to bed, dear.'

'Can't I have the wireless on for company?'

'All right. Keep it low. We aren't supposed to be here to enjoy ourselves, you know.'

Theo steps forth from his doorway as another car approaches the gate, flicking its large headlights.

The chauffeur puts his head out while Theo opens the gate, but Theo speaks first, apparently recognizing the occupant of the back seat.

'His Excellency, Prince Eugene,' Theo says, respectfully.

The chauffeur's mouth smiles a little, his eyes drooping, perhaps with boredom, perhaps with tiredness.

'I'm pretty sure they're not at home. Were they expecting his Excellency?' Theo says.

'Yes,' says the visitor from the depths of the back seat.

'I'll just call the house,' says Theo and returns to the lodge.

'Drive on,' says Prince Eugene to his driver. 'Don't wait for him and all that rot. I said to Klopstock I'd look in after dinner and I'm looking in after dinner. He should have told

his porter to expect me.' As he speaks, the car is already off on its meander towards the house.

Lister is waiting at the door. He runs down the steps towards the big car as the driver gets out to open the door for the prince.

'The Baron and Baroness are not at home,' Lister says.

Prince Eugene has got out and looks at Lister. 'Who are you?' he says.

'Excuse me, your Excellency, that I'm in my off-duty clothes,' Lister says. 'I'm Lister, the butler.'

'You look like a Secretary of State.'

'Thank you, sir,' says Lister.

'It isn't a compliment,' says the prince. 'What do you mean, they're not at home? I saw the Baron this morning and he asked me to drop in after dinner. They're expecting me.' He mounts the steps, Lister following him, and enters the house.

In the hall he nods towards the library door from where the sound of voices come. 'Go and tell them I'm here.' He starts to unbutton his coat.

'Your Excellency, I have orders that they are not to be disturbed.' Lister edges round so that his back is turned to the library door, as if protecting it. He adds, 'The door is locked from the inside.'

'What's going on?'

'A meeting, sir, with one of the secretaries. It has already lasted some hours and is likely to continue far into the night.'

The prince, plump, with pale cheeks, refrains from taking off his coat as he says, 'Whose secretary is it, his or hers?'

'The gentleman in question is the one who's been secretary to both, sir, for the past five months, nearly.'

'Almighty God, I'd better get out of here!' says Prince Eugene.

'I would do that, sir,' Lister says, leading the way to the front door.

'The Baron seemed all right this morning,' says the Prince on the threshold. 'He'd just got back from Paris.'

'I imagine there have been telephone conversations throughout the afternoon, sir.'

'He didn't seem to be expecting any trouble.'

'None of them did, your Excellency. They were not prepared for it. They have placed themselves, unfortunately, within the realm of predestination.'

'You talk like a Secretary of State to the Vatican.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'It isn't a compliment.' The Prince, buttoning up his coat, passes out into the night air through the door which Lister is holding open for him. Before descending the steps to his car, he says, 'Lister, do you expect something to happen?'

'We do, sir. The domestic staff is prepared.'

'Lister, in case of investigations no need, you understand, to mention my visit tonight. It is quite a casual neighbourly visit. Not relevant.'

'Of course, your Excellency.'

'By the way, I'm not an Excellency, I'm a Highness.'

'Your Highness.'

'A domestic staff as large and efficient as yourselves is hard to come by. Quite exceptional in Switzerland. How did the Baron do it?'

'Money,' says Lister.

The voices, indistinguishable but excited, wave over to them from the library.

'I need a butler,' says his Highness. He takes out a card and gives it to Lister. Jerking his head towards the library door he says, 'When it's all over, if you need a place, come to me. I would be glad of some of the other servants, too.'

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'I doubt if we shall be looking for further employment, sir, but I thank you deeply for your offer.' Lister puts the card in a note-case which he has brought out of his vest pocket.

'And his cook? That excellent chef? Will he be free?'

'He, too, has his plans, your Excellency.'

'There will of course be a scandal. He must have paid you all very well for your services.'

'For our silence, sir.'

Upstairs a voice growls and the shutters bang.

'That's him in the attic,' says Prince Eugene.

'A sad case, sir.'

'He inherits everything.'

'How, sir? He's a connection of the Baroness through her first marriage. A cousin of the first husband. I think the Baron could hardly bequeath a vast estate to him, poor thing in the attic. The Baron is succeeded by a brother in Brazil.'

'The one in Brazil is the youngest. The one in the attic is next in line – no relation to her at all.'

'That,' said Lister, 'I did not know.'

'Few people know it. Don't tell anyone I said so. Klopstock would kill me. Would have killed me.'

'Well, it makes no difference to us, sir, who gets the fortune. Our fortunes lie in other directions.'

'A great pity. I would have taken on the cook. An excellent cook. What's his name?'

'Clovis, sir.'

'Oh, yes, Clovis.'

'But he will be giving up his profession, I dare say.'

'A waste of talent.' The prince gets into his car and is driven away from the scene.

Mr Samuel has taken off his leather coat and is sitting in the large pantry office which gives off from the servants' hall,

looking through a file of papers. He leans back in his chair, dressed in a black turtle-necked sweater and black corduroy trousers. The door is open behind him and the large window in front of him is black and shiny with blurs of light from the courtyard, like a faulty television screen. A car draws up to the back door. Mr Samuel says over his shoulder to the servants in the room beyond, 'Here's Mr McGuire, let him in.'

'He has the keys,' says Heloise.

'Show a little courtesy,' says Mr Samuel.

'I hear Lister coming,' says Eleanor.

Mr Samuel then gets up and comes into the servants' sitting-room. From the passage leading to the front of the house comes Lister, while from the back door a key is successfully playing with the lock.

Lister stops to listen. 'Who is this?'

'Mr McGuire,' says Mr Samuel. 'I asked him to come and join us. I might need a hand with the data. I hope that's all right.'

'You should have mentioned it to me first,' said Lister. 'You should have phoned me, Mr Samuel. However, I have no objection. As it happens I need Mr McGuire's services.'

A man now appears from the back door. He seems slightly older than Mr Samuel, with a weathered and freckled face. 'How's everything? How's everybody?' he says.

'Good evening, Mr McGuire,' says Lister.

'Make yourself at home,' says Clovis.

'Good evening, thanks. I'm a bit hungry,' says Mr McGuire.

'Secretaries get their own meals,' says Clovis.

'I've come flat out direct from Paris.'

'Heat him up something, Clovis,' Lister says.

'Leave it to me,' says Eleanor, rising from her chair with ostentatious meekness.

'Mr Samuel, Mr McGuire,' says Lister, 'are you here for a limited time, or do you intend to wait?'

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Mr McGuire says, 'I'd like to see the Baron, actually.'

'Out of the question,' says Mr Samuel.

'Not to be disturbed,' says Lister.

'Then what have I come all this way for?' says Mr McGuire, pulling off his sheepskin coat in a resigned way.

'To hold Mr Samuel's hand,' says Pablo.

'I'll see the Baron in the morning. I have to talk to him,' says Mr McGuire.

'Too late,' says Lister. 'The Baron is no more.'

'I can hear his voice. What d'you mean?'

'Let us not strain after vulgar chronology,' says Lister. 'I have work for you.'

'There's veal stew,' Eleanor calls out from the kitchen.

'Blanquette,' says Clovis, 'de veau.' He puts a hand to his head and closes his eyes as one tormented by a long and fruitless effort to instruct.

'Do you have a cigarette handy?' says Heloise.

'There's a lot of noise,' says Mr McGuire, jerking his head to indicate the front part of the house. 'It fairly penetrates. Who's the company tonight?'

'Hadrian,' says Lister, taking a chair, 'give a hand to Eleanor. Tell her I'd be obliged for a cup of coffee.'

'When I was a boy of fourteen,' says Lister, 'I decided to leave England.'

Mr McGuire reaches down and stops the tape-recorder. 'Start again,' he says. 'Make it more colloquial, Lister. Don't say "a boy of fourteen", say "a boy, fourteen", like that, Lister.'

They sit alone in Lister's large bedroom. They each occupy an armchair of deep, olive-green soft leather which, ageless and unworn, seems almost certainly to have come from another part of the house, probably the library, in the course

of some complete refurbishing. A thick grey carpet covers the whole floor. Lister's bed is narrow but spectacular with a well-preserved bushy bear-like fur cover which he might have acquired independently or which might have once covered the knees of an earlier Klopstock while crossing a winter landscape by car, and which, anyway, looks as if importance is attached to it; indeed, it is certain that everything in the room, including Mr McGuire, is there by the approval of Lister only.

Between the two men, on the floor, is a heavily built tape-recorder in an open case with a handle. It is attached by a long snaky cord to an electric plug beside the bed. The two magnetic bobbins, of the 18-centimetre size, have come to a standstill at Mr McGuire's touch of the stop-switch; the bobbins not being entirely equal in their content of tape it can be assessed that half-an-hour of something has already been recorded at some previous time.

Lister says, 'Style can be left to the journalists, Mr McGuire. This is only a preliminary press handout. The inside story is something else – it's an exclusive, and we've made our plans for the exclusive. All we need now is something for the general press to go on when they start to question us, you see.'

'Take my advice, Lister,' says Mr McGuire, 'and give it a conversational touch.'

'Whose conversational touch – mine or the journalists?'

'Theirs,' says Mr McGuire.

'Turn on the machine,' says Lister.

Mr McGuire does so, and the bobbins go spinning.

'When I was a boy, fourteen,' says Lister, 'I decided to leave England. There was a bit of trouble over me having to do with Eleanor under the grand piano, she being my aunt and only nine. Dating from that traumatic experience, Eleanor conceived an inverted avuncular fixation, which is to say that she followed me up when she turned fourteen and –'

'It isn't right,' says Mr McGuire, turning off the machine.

'It isn't true, but that's not to say it isn't right,' Lister says. 'Now, Mr McGuire, my boy, we haven't got all night to waste. I want you to take a short statement of similar tone from Eleanor and one from Heloise. The others can take care of themselves. After that we have to pose for the photographs.' Lister bends down, turns on the machine, and continues. 'My father,' he says, 'was a valet in that house, a good position. It was Watham Grange, Leicestershire, under the grand piano. I worked in France. When Eleanor joined me I worked in a restaurant that was owned by a Greek in Amsterdam. Then we started in private families and now I've been butler with the Klopstocks here in Switzerland for over five years. But to sum up I really left England because of the climate – wet.' Lister turns off the switch and stares at the tape-recorder.

Mr McGuire says, 'Won't they want something about the Klopstocks?'

Lister says, impatiently, 'I am thinking.' Presently he turns on the recorder again, meanwhile glancing at his watch. 'The death of the Baron and Baroness has been a very great shock to us all. It was the last thing we expected. We heard no shots, naturally, since our quarters are quite isolated from the residential domain. And of course, in these large houses, the wind does make a lot of noise. The shutters upstairs are somewhat loose and in fact we were to have them seen to tomorrow afternoon.'

Mr McGuire halts the machine. 'I thought you were going to say that him in the attic makes so much noise that you mistook one of his fits for the shots being fired.'

'I've changed my mind,' Lister says.

'Why?' says Mr McGuire.

Lister closes his eyes with impatience while Mr McGuire switches on again. The bobbins whirl. 'The Baron gave orders that they were not to be disturbed,' Lister says.

'What's next?' says Mr McGuire.

'Play it back, Mr McGuire, please.'

Mr McGuire sets the reels in reverse, concentratedly stopping their motion a short distance from the beginning. 'It would be about here,' he says, 'that your bit begins.' He turns it on. The machine emits two long, dramatic sighs followed by a woman's voice – 'I climbed Mount Atlas alone every year on May Day and sacrificed a garland of bay leaves to Apollo. At last, one year he descended from his fiery chariot –'

Mr McGuire has turned off, and has manipulated the machine to run further forward silently.

'That must be the last of your Klopstock soundtracks,' Lister says.

'Yes, it is the last.'

'You should have used fresh reels for us. We don't want to be mixed up with what Apollo did.'

'I'll remove that bit of the tape before we start making copies. Leave it to me,' says Mr McGuire, getting up to unplug the machine.

'What is to emerge must emerge,' says Lister, standing, watching, while Mr McGuire packs the wire into place and fastens the lid on the tape-recorder. He lifts it and follows Lister out of the room. 'It's a heavy machine,' he says, 'to carry from place to place.'

They descend the stairs to the first landing of the servants' wing. Here, Lister leads the way to the grand staircase, followed after a little hesitation by Mr McGuire who has first seemed inclined to continue down the back stairs.

'I hear no voices,' Lister says as he descends, looking down the well of the great staircase to the black and white paving below. 'The books are silent.'

They have reached the ground floor. Mr McGuire stands with his heavy load while Lister approaches the library door.

NOT TO DISTURB

He waits, turns the handle, pressing gently; the door does not give.

‘Locked,’ says Lister, turning away, ‘and silent. Let’s proceed,’ he says, leading the way to the servants’ quarters. ‘There remain a good many things to be accomplished and still more chaos effectively to organize.’