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SF PERUSALS

A Song at Twilight

A Comedy in Two Acts

Noël Coward

A Samuel French Acting Edition



SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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A SONG AT TWILIGHT

Produced by H. M. Tennent Ltd at the Queen's Theatre, London, on the 14th April, 1966, with the following cast of characters:

(In order of their appearance)

HILDE LATYMER ..... *Irene Worth*

FELIX, a waiter ..... *Sean Barrett*

HUGO LATYMER ..... *Noël Coward*

CARLOTTA GRAY ..... *Lilli Palmer*

The play directed by Vivian Matalon

Setting by Brian Currah

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the play passes in a private suite in a luxurious hotel in Switzerland.

ACT I

Evening.

ACT II

A few minutes later.

A Song at Twilight

ACT I

SCENE: *The sitting-room of a private suite in a luxurious hotel in Switzerland. Evening. The suite is occupied for two or three months each year by* SIR HUGO LATYMER, *an elderly writer of considerable eminence. The conventional hotel furnishing has been augmented by some of Sir Hugo's personal possessions, which include an impressive writing-desk, down* R., *and a special armchair,* C., *to* L. *of which is a small table. On this are books, bottles of medicines and pills, a small gold clock and a slim vase containing a number of ball-point pens. On the walls hang some of Sir Hugo's favourite Impressionist paintings. Down* L. *is a door leading into the bedroom. There are double doors up* R. *which open on to a small lobby and then the corridor.*

When the CURTAIN rises HILDE LATYMER *is discovered seated at the writing-desk. She is a faded woman in her early fifties. She has been married to Sir Hugo for nearly twenty years and was originally his secretary. Apart from being his official German translator, she is capable, dedicated, and orders his life with considerable efficiency. Standing* L. *of her is* FELIX, *the floor waiter. He is a startlingly handsome young man of about twenty-eight, and there is already in his manner that subtle blend of obsequiousness, authority and charm which, if he does not allow his good looks to lead him astray, will ultimately carry him to the top of his profession. At the moment he*

is holding a notebook and pencil, and listening to HILDE *with polite attentiveness.*

HILDE. That will be all for the moment, Felix. Sir Hugo's guest is due at eight o'clock, but it is possible that she might be a little late, so I think you should be prepared to serve the dinner at about eight-thirty, but not before.

FELIX. A touch of garlic in the salad dressing as usual?

HILDE. Yes. But only the smallest touch. We don't want a repetition of last Friday, do we?

FELIX. Friday night is much to be regretted, Milady. But if you will remember, I was off duty. Giovanni is a most willing boy, but he is not yet accustomed to Sir Hugo's tastes.

HILDE. You will warn him to be more careful next time.

FELIX. Very good, Milady. (FELIX *bows and exits up* C.)

HILDE. (*Picking up the telephone and speaking with a rather heavy French accent.*) 'Allo. Mademoiselle, j'ai demandé un préavis à Londres il-y-a presquane demi-heure. Est-ce que vous en avez des nouvelles? . . . Oui —oui merci, j'attendrai. (*She replaces the receiver, rises, goes to the bureau up* L., *takes a file from the top of it, and returns to the desk. The TELEPHONE RINGS. Answering it.*) Hallo. . . . Is that you, Carl? This is Hilde Latymer speaking. I have been trying to get you all the afternoon. First of all, regarding the lecture tour in the States. . . . Yes, I know, but Sir Hugo really isn't up to it. . . . Oh, yes, he is much better, but the doctor insists that he must not undertake anything that is not absolutely necessary. . . . Yes, he will accept the Doctorate at the University and make a speech as arranged, but nothing more than that. After it's over we will either come straight back here or go to Arizona for a rest. . . . Next, regarding the film proposition for *The Winding River.* You will have to put in the contract that he has complete

veto on the script and the adapter. . . . Well, he certainly won't sign it unless that is confirmed in writing. . . . On the contrary, I think it matters a great deal. It involves his name and reputation. . . .

(*A this moment* SIR HUGO LATYMER *enters* L. *from the bedroom. He is a distinguished-looking man of seventy. His figure is slim and erect. Sometimes, when he is in a good mood, he looks younger than he actually is by several years. At other times, when upset over some triviality or worried about his health, he becomes suddenly enfeebled and deliberately ancient. This, of course, is a pose, but it works like a charm on doctors and nurses or whoever happens to be looking after him at the moment. It even works on* HILDE *occasionally, notwithstanding the fact that she has had twenty years to grow accustomed to it.* SIR HUGO *is wearing a brocaded dressing-gown, his white hair is slightly tousled and he looks irascible.*)

HUGO. (*Moving to* C. *below the sofa.*) What involves my name and reputation?

HILDE. (*Putting her hand over the receiver.*) It's Carl. We're talking about *The Winding River* contract.

HUGO. Then you are both wasting your time. I have no intention of signing it whatever concessions they make.

HILDE. But, Hugo dear, you did say that providing they gave you complete veto of script and adapter that . . .

HUGO. (*Snappily.*) Well, I have changed my mind. I have had no less than three novels and five of my best short stories massacred by that cretinous medium. I refuse to have any more of it. (*He moves* C.)

HILDE. (*Into the receiver.*) I can't talk any more at the moment, Carl. Ring me in the morning at eleven o'clock. . . . Very well, ten o'clock, but be sure to have it put through to my room. . . . Yes, three five five. Good-bye. (*She hangs up.*)

HUGO. (*Sitting* C.) Carl's getting out of hand. He needs

a serious talking to. All he thinks about is his damned percentage.

HILDE. You can't altogether blame him for that. He *is* your agent.

HUGO. What time is it?

HILDE. (*Glancing at her watch.*) Nearly half-past seven. Isn't that clock going?

HUGO. I haven't the faintest idea. It's so exquisitely made that I can't see it without my glasses.

HILDE. You said you were delighted with it when I gave it to you.

HUGO. Well, I'm not now.

HILDE. I'm sorry. I'll try and change it.

HUGO. And please don't look martyred. It draws your mouth down at the corners. Like a weary old camel.

HILDE. Thank you.

HUGO. With two unsymmetrical humps.

HILDE. That's a dromedary. (*She rises, moves to the bureau, and puts three books from it into the* R. *cupboard.*) Have you had your bath?

HUGO. No, I have not had my bath.

HILDE. Well, don't you think you should? She's due at eight.

HUGO. If I'm not ready, she can wait for me, can't she? An extra ten minutes tacked on to all those years can't matter all that much.

HILDE. (*Moving to* L. *of the desk.*) You're in a very disagreeable mood.

HUGO. I'm nervous.

HILDE. It's your own fault if you are. You needn't have agreed to see her, and in fact, I still think it is a great mistake.

HUGO. Yes, I know you do. You've made that abundantly clear during the last three days. You've never been exactly adept at hiding your feelings.

HILDE. On the contrary, Hugo, that is one of the things I do best. Living with you for twenty years has been excellent training.

HUGO. Why are you so frightened of Carlotta?

HILDE. (*Calmly.*) I am not in the least frightened of Carlotta.

HUGO. Oh, yes, you are. The very idea of her fills your soul with dread. Come on now, admit it.

HILDE. (*Rising and moving* L. *below the sofa.*) It is time for your blue pill. (HILDE *exits* D. L. *abruptly, leaving the door open.*)

HUGO. (*Enjoying himself.*) You'd better take a tranquillizer to calm your desperate fears.

(HILDE *enters with a pill on a dish, and a glass of water.*)

HILDE. (*Crossing above the sofa to* R. *of it.*) Whatever fears I may have about Carlotta are entirely on your account. She is bound to upset you in some way or other. She wouldn't suddenly reappear in your life like this unless she wanted something. (*Handing him the pill.*) Here you are.

(HUGO *takes the pill, swallows it, and drinks.*)

HUGO. Perhaps she wants a reunion.

HILDE. Money, more likely. She has not been very successful during the last fifteen years.

HUGO. Have you been following her career?

HILDE. (*Taking the glass and crossing* L. *above the sofa.*) There hasn't been much career to follow lately. (HILDE *exits* D. L.)

HUGO. Poor Carlotta! (*He rises and takes a cigarette from the box on the drinks table* U. R.)

(HILDE *enters, to below the sofa.* HUGO *replaces the cigarette.*)

HILDE. She will upset you. I feel it in my bones. It is like the weather. I can always tell when it is going to rain.

HUGO. (*Moving to* R. *of her.*) That particular form of prescience is rheumatic rather than clairvoyante. In any case, it is within the bounds of possibility that I might upset her.

HILDE. She doesn't suffer from your particular form of nervous indigestion.

HUGO. (*Dropping her hand and sitting* C.) I see you're determined to be tiresome.

HILDE. (*Moving to* L. *of him.*) It's unfair of you to say that. It's you I'm thinking of. You've been so much better lately. Doctor Benoist says your blood pressure is back to normal, you're sleeping well and you haven't had any pains for three weeks. I just don't want you to have a relapse. You know that any sort of excitement is bad for you.

HUGO. Do you seriously believe that seeing Carlotta again will excite me to the extent of sending up my blood pressure?

HILDE. You've been giving every indication of it.

HUGO. Oh, Hilde, Hilde! What an egregious ass you are.

HILDE. You have now called me a camel, a dromedary and an ass within the last ten minutes. Your normal dialogue is less zoological. (*She moves below the sofa.*) You have worked yourself up into a state about seeing Carlotta again and it's no use pretending you haven't. I know the symptoms. I haven't been with you for twenty years for nothing.

HUGO. (*Patiently.*) Now listen to me, Hilde. My affair with Carlotta lasted exactly two years, and we parted in a blaze of mutual acrimony. That was centuries ago, and I haven't clapped eyes on her since, except once on the cinema screen when she appeared briefly as a Mother Superior in an excruciatingly bad film about a nun with a vast bust. Nor have we corresponded. This sudden request on her part to see me again has not unnaturally filled me with curiosity. It is quite possible that your surmise is right and that she wants to borrow money. If

that is so, I will lend her some for old times' sake. On the other hand, she may merely want to see me for sentimental reasons. Time and the difficult years may have mellowed her, or she may even wish to gloat over my age and infirmity.

HILDE. (*Sharply.*) You are *not* infirm.

HUGO. After all, you must remember that she was very much in love with me.

HILDE. And you with her?

HUGO. Of course. Even so, the chances of a passionate, physical reunion are remote.

HILDE. So I should hope. The very idea would be ridiculous.

HUGO. Not quite so ridiculous as all that. Anyhow, you cannot deny that the possibility crossed your mind.

HILDE. (*Hotly.*) I most certainly do deny it.

HUGO. Quite frankly, I suspect you of being jealous.

HILDE. (*Quietly.*) No, Hugo, I am not jealous. I realized many years ago that I had no right to be jealous.

HUGO. Since when has jealousy been so law-abiding? Is it an emotion that obediently sticks to the rules?

HILDE. I have no wish to argue with you.

HUGO. You are jealous of all my friends, of anyone who is close to me, and you always have been.

HILDE. (*With a show of spirit.*) You have not so many friends for me to be jealous of.

HUGO. You hate Mariette. You are barely civil to Cedric Marcombe and David when they come here.

HILDE. They are barely civil to me.

HUGO. Cedric Marcombe is a man of brilliant intelligence and exquisite taste. He is also the greatest connoisseur of modern art alive today.

HILDE. And what is David?

HUGO. (*Defensively.*) David is one of the most promising young painters that England has produced in the last twenty years. He also happens to be the son of Lord Tenterden.

HILDE. In that case he should have better manners.

And his paintings I do not care for at all. They are ugly and cruel.

HUGO. (*Viciously.*) As a full-blooded German you are scarcely in a position to object to cruelty in art or anything else.

HILDE. It is wrong of you to speak to me like that, Hugo, and most unkind. When you are in a better mood you will see that this is so, and be sorry. In any case, this sort of argument is waste of time and energy. (*She leans forward.* HUGO *turns his head away.*) You cannot, after all these long years, seriously imagine that I am jealous of your friends or your heart. If I am jealous at all it is for your well-being. You really must try not to get cross so easily. You know what it does to your acids. Remember what Doctor Benoist said.

HUGO. Now you're talking like a district nurse.

HILDE. No district nurse would have had the endurance to put up with your sudden tempers for as long as I have.

HUGO. Do you wish to leave me? Are you giving me a month's notice?

HILDE. If I wished to leave you I should have done so long ago. Now it is too late.

HUGO. For God's sake stop looking hurt, Hilde. It infuriates me.

HILDE. If you do not wish me to look hurt you should not try so hard to hurt me. I do my best to help you with the business of your life, even to love you as far as you will allow me to. But you make it most difficult for me, sometimes almost too difficult to be borne.

HUGO. Oh Lord! Now I suppose you are going to cry.

HILDE. (*Rising.*) No, Hugo. I am not going to cry. That, too, is waste of time and energy. (*Moving* U. C.) I am going to put on my hat.

HUGO. (*Realizing he has gone too far.*) Hilde . . .

HILDE. If you are determined to receive your long-lost love in a dressing-gown with your hair all rumpled, that is entirely your affair.

HUGO. Hilde . . . (HILDE *moves to* L. *of* HUGO.) I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I upset you.

HILDE. It is nothing new.

HUGO. (*Returning to above the* C. *chair.*) I don't feel now that I can face her alone. You'd better stay, after all.

HILDE. Certainly not. I've already arranged to dine with Liesel at the Grappe d'Or and go to the cinema afterwards.

HUGO. Liesel is a weather-beaten old Lesbian.

HILDE. (*Sitting on the* R. *arm of the sofa.*) She is also highly intelligent.

HUGO. Is she in love with you?

HILDE. Not in the least. She lives with a Chinese student who paints butterfles on glass.

HUGO. Whatever for?

HILDE. Actually she's very talented.

HUGO. (*Moving to* HILDE.) Put Liesel off—don't go—stay with me. I need your support.

HILDE. (*Firmly.*) No, Hugo. (*Rising.*) You've brought this situation on yourself and you will have to deal with it yourself.

HUGO. You have ordered the dinner?

HILDE. Yes. Felix will bring it when you ring.

HUGO. (*Sitting* C.) I think I should like a drink, to fortify me.

HILDE. (*Moving* U. L.) I'll ring for some ice. (*She rings the service bell.*) It had better be vodka. You're having it with the caviare, anyhow.

HUGO. I never told you to order caviare.

HILDE. No. It was my own idea. (*Moving* D. C.) I ordered pink champagne, too.

HUGO. Pink champagne! Good God, why?

HILDE. You're always accusing me of not having a sense of humour. I thought I'd like to prove you wrong.

HUGO. Is the rest of the menu equally plutocratic?

HILDE. No, comparatively simple. Steak Bearnaise, green salad, and a chocolate soufflé.

HUGO. I shan't sleep a wink.

HILDE. I shouldn't count too much on that, anyhow. The Maalox tablets are in the table drawer if you should need them. (FELIX *enters* C. *with a bucket of ice, and moves to the drinks table.* HILDE, *moving* U. C.) Give Sir Hugo a vodka on the rocks, will you, Felix.

FELIX. Very good, Milady.

HILDE. I won't be more than a few minutes. (HILDE *exits* U. C., *closing the doors.* FELIX *pours a vodka on the rocks.*)

HUGO. (*With charm.*) I missed you sadly last evening, Felix. Where did you disappear to?

FELIX. It was my half-day off, sir.

HUGO. Your substitute lacked charm. He also breathed like an old locomotive.

FELIX. That was Giovanni, sir. He comes from Calabria.

HUGO. The railway journey must have made a profound impression on him.

FELIX. (*Moving to* L. *of* HUGO.) Your vodka, sir.

HUGO. (*Taking it.*) Thank you. Did you enjoy your half-day off?

FELIX. Oh, yes, sir. We went to swim in the piscine at Vevey, it is not so crowded as the one here, and then we came back and went to a film.

HUGO. We?

FELIX. My friend and I. He is the assistant barman at the Hotel de la Paix. He is a champion swimmer and has won many trophies.

HUGO. You look as though you should be a good swimmer yourself, with those shoulders.

FELIX. Not as good as he is, but I myself love to water-ski. It is a great sport.

HUGO. It must be. Water-skiing was not invented when I was your age. (HILDE *enters* U. C., *leaving the doors open, moves down to the desk and sits.*) Thank you, Felix. You will bring the dinner when I ring?

FELIX. Very good, sir. (*He moves* U. C.)

HUGO. It should be in about half an hour's time, depending on when my guest arrives.

FELIX. Bien, monsieur. (FELIX *bows and exits, closing the doors.* HILDE *starts to stamp letters.*)

HILDE. Are you feeling more relaxed?

HUGO. More resigned, at any rate. That's quite a masculine-looking little hat, almost a bowler. Are you wearing it as a subtle gesture to your hostess?

HILDE. You know I dislike that sort of joke, Hugo. Liesel has been a good friend of mine for many years. I am very fond of her. The other side of her life is of no interest to me.

HUGO. Give me a cigarette.

HILDE. No, Hugo. You've already had too many today.

HUGO. I tell you I'm nervous. (*The TELEPHONE RINGS.*) There now!

HILDE. (*Answering the telephone.*) Oui, Gaston. Demandez à Madame de monter toute de suite. (*She hangs up and rises to* L. *above the desk.*)

HUGO. The tiresome woman is early.

HILDE. No. It is you who are late. Go quickly. It would be inelegant to receive an ex-mistress in your dressing-gown, however old she is. I will talk to her until you are ready. Go along. (*She puts the letters in a pile on the desk ready for posting.*)

HUGO. (*Moving* D. L.) Promise me you'll cut the cinema and come straight back here after dinner.

HILDE. That all depends. I'll think about it. Go along —hurry. (HUGO *exits* D. L. CARLOTTA *knocks at the door* U. C. HILDE *goes to* L. *of it and opens it.* CARLOTTA GRAY *comes into the room. She is an attractive woman who at first glance would appear to be in her late forties or early fifties. She is heavily made up and her hair is expertly tinted. She is wearing expensive costume jewellery, perhaps a little too much of it. Her dinner-dress is simple and well cut. She carries a light coat over her arm. Holding out her hand.*) I am Hilde Latymer. (HILDE *and* CARLOTTA *shake hands.*) How do you do.

CARLOTTA. How do you do. I recognize your voice. You were so kind on the telephone.

HILDE. My husband is dressing; he won't be more than a few minutes. May I? (*She takes Carlotta's fur.*)

CARLOTTA. Thank you.

HILDE. Please be so kind as to sit down and take a cigarette if you should care to smoke. They are in that tortoiseshell box. (HILDE *exits* D. L. *with the fur.* CARLOTTA *takes a cigarette from the box on the drinks table, lights it, and crosses below the sofa. She looks around the room.* HILDE *enters* L., *moving to the drinks table.*) Would you care for a drink?

CARLOTTA. Perhaps not quite yet. I would rather wait a little. (HILDE *moves* C., *to* R. *of* CARLOTTA.) How is he —Hugo? (*She corrects herself.*) Sir Hugo?

HILDE. He is almost completely well again. He has, of course, to take care not to overdo things and not to become agitated or unduly excited. (HILDE *sits in the chair* C.)

CARLOTTA. He has certainly had a wonderful career. It wouldn't be surprising if he sometimes found the burden of his eminence a trifle nerveracking.

HILDE. (*Not quite pleased with this either.*) Nerve-racking?

CARLOTTA. The continual demands made upon his time, the constant strain of having to live up to the self-created image he has implanted in the public mind. How fortunate he is to have you to protect him.

HILDE. (*Stiffly.*) He isn't, I think, in quite such urgent need of protection as you imagine.

CARLOTTA. You've been married for twenty years, haven't you?

HILDE. Yes. He engaged me as his secretary in January nineteen forty-five and a few months later we were married.

CARLOTTA. (*Smiling.*) I remember the headlines. It caused quite a sensation.

HILDE. (*Turning away.*) Yes, I know it did. There was much foolishness written in the papers.

CARLOTTA. How does he feel about seeing me again, after so long?

HILDE. I cannot say. He is curious, naturally.

CARLOTTA. And you? (*Rising to* C.) What are your reactions to this—this rather peculiar situation?

HILDE. I have no feelings about it one way or the other.

CARLOTTA. I will accept the snub, but I am not entirely convinced by it.

HILDE. It was not intended to be a snub. You will please forgive me?

CARLOTTA. There is nothing whatever to forgive. I find it perfectly understandable that you should be suspicious of me. It is the duty of even the kindest protective dragons to be wary of strangers. It is sad that we did not meet in earlier, different circumstances. (*Stubbing out her cigarette on the table* C.) We might have been friends.

HILDE. (*Melting a trifle.*) Thank you, Miss Gray.

(HUGO *enters from the bedroom* L. *He is wearing an emerald green velvet smoking-jacket over dark trousers. He has a cream shirt, a black tie, and his slippers are monogrammed in gold.* CARLOTTA *looks at him for a moment, then moves slowly towards him.*)

CARLOTTA. Hugo! What a strange moment this is, isn't it? I had planned so many things to say and now they've gone clean out of my head. Do we embrace?

HUGO. (*With a slightly self-conscious smile.*) Why not? (*He kisses her formally on both cheeks.*)

CARLOTTA. (*Drawing away.*) How well you look! Slim as ever and so distinguished. White hair definitely becomes you.

HUGO. (*With splendid chivalry.*) The years seem to have forgotten you, Carlotta.

CARLOTTA. Oh, no, my dear. It isn't that they've forgotten me; it's that I have remembered them and taken the right precautions.

HUGO. You and Hilde have already made friends, I see.

CARLOTTA. (*Glancing swiftly at* HILDE.) Yes. As a matter of fact, we have. (*She moves* C., *looking at* HILDE.) It's been puzzling me where I could have seen you before, but now I remember. There's a photograph of you in Hugo's autobiography. You are leaning against a sort of pillar and shading your eyes with your hand as though you were worried about the weather.

HUGO. The sort of pillar was one of the columns of the Parthenon.

HILDE. The light was very strong.

CARLOTTA. Alas. There is no photograph of me in the book. At least, only a verbal one. (*Looking at* HUGO.) The light was a little strong in that, too.

HUGO. Can I offer you a drink?

CARLOTTA. Oh, yes, by all means. I should love one.

(HUGO *starts towards the drinks table, but* HILDE *moves there instead.*)

HILDE. Whisky, brandy, gin, vodka?

CARLOTTA. Vodka, please, on the rocks. (HILDE *pours the drink. Turning to* HUGO.) I expected you to look much older. But that's beside the point nowadays, isn't it? I mean—people hardly ever look their real age any more. Time is learning to accept a few defeats. It's rather fun frustrating the old monster.

HILDE. (*Moving below the* C. *chair with the drink.*) Your vodka, Miss Gray.

CARLOTTA. Thank you so much.

HILDE. (*Moving to the desk for the letters.*) I am afraid I must leave you now. I have a dinner engagement.

CARLOTTA. (*Moving* L. *of the desk.*) Oh, how disappointing. I had hoped to get to know you better.

HILDE. (*Moving* U. C.) We shall probably meet again.

CARLOTTA. Of course. We're almost bound to. I have moved into this hotel.

HILDE. (*Caught unawares, moving* C.) Oh!

CARLOTTA. (*Putting out her hand.*) Don't be alarmed. I shall only be here for a few days. I am having a series of injections at the Clinique and it's more convenient to be here than in Vevey.

HILDE. (*Shaking* CARLOTTA'S *hand.*) Au revoir, then, Miss Gray.

CARLOTTA. À bientôt, Lady Latymer. (HILDE *shoots an equivocal look at* HUGO *and exits swiftly* U. C. CARLOTTA *strolls over to the window.*) How lovely it is with the lights glittering in the distance. I went over to Evian the other evening on the little steamer and won nearly a thousand francs.

HUGO. (*Slightly shocked, moving* C.) Can you afford to play so high?

CARLOTTA. Oh, yes. I have a certain amount put by. I also still get alimony from my last husband.

HUGO. Have you had many others?

CARLOTTA. (*Moving* R. *of the* C. *chair.*) Two before this one. They both died. One in an air crash and the other in the war.

HUGO. Did you love them?

CARLOTTA. Oh, yes. I shouldn't have married them if I hadn't.

HUGO. Have you any children?

CARLOTTA. Yes. I had a son by my second husband. He's twenty-four now and very attractive. You'd love him. Am I to drink alone?

HUGO. Too much alcohol is bad for me.

CARLOTTA. Too much alcohol is bad for everyone. Just pour yourself a teeny weeny one to keep me company.

HUGO. (*Moving to the drinks table and pouring himself a vodka.*) Really, Carlotta, you're too absurd.

CARLOTTA. (*Sitting* R. *on the sofa.*) She's nice, your wife. I like her.

HUGO. I'm so glad.

CARLOTTA. In spite of the fact that she doesn't care for me much. I don't think you quite did her justice in your book. But then, you weren't very nice about anybody in your book, were you?

HUGO. You were under no obligation to read it.

CARLOTTA. There was no warning on the cover. You take a fairly jaundiced view of your fellow creatures, don't you, on the whole?

HUGO. Perhaps. I prefer to see people as they are rather than as more sentinmental minds would wish them to be. However, I am a commentator, not a moralist. (*He sits* C.) I state no preferences.

CARLOTTA. Admirable!

HUGO. I would hate you to imagine that I am unaware of the mocking expression in your eye.

CARLOTTA. (*With a smile.*) Don't worry. I would never suspect you of missing a trick. Except perhaps the most important one of all.

HUGO. And what might that be?

CARLOTTA. (*Rising to the drinks table for a cigarette.*) The knack of discovering the best in people's characters instead of the worst.

HUGO. Without wishing to undermine your radiant self-confidence, I must break it to you that that has been said often before. Usually by ardent lady journalists.

CARLOTTA. One two—one two—and through and through—the vorpal blade went snicker-snack. (*She lights her cigarette at the table* C.)

HUGO. My dear Carlotta. I had no idea you had such a thorough grounding in the classics. You were virtually illiterate when we first met.

CARLOTTA. (*Laughing.*) It was you who set my stumbling feet upon the path of literature, Hugo. It was you who opened my eyes to many wonders.

HUGO. Don't talk such nonsense.

CARLOTTA. (*Moving below the sofa.*) You worked assiduously on my virgin mind. And now I come to think of it, you didn't do so badly with my virgin body.

HUGO. (*Turning away.*) Please don't talk like that, Carlotta. I find it distasteful.

CARLOTTA. (*Gently.*) Try not to be so easily cross with me. It's almost too reminiscent. You always told me I was vulgar. According to your lights, that is. But your lights are so bright and highly placed that they bring out the bags under my eyes and the guttersnipe in my character. They always did and they always will. There's really nothing I can do about it, except perhaps go away. Would you like me to go away, now, this very minute? I promise I will if you truly want me to. You don't even have to answer. A valedictory nod will be enough.

HUGO. Of course I don't want you to go away. With all my faults, and in spite of my "jaundiced" view of my fellow creatures, I am seldom discourteous.

CARLOTTA. I would like it to be something warmer than your courtesy that wishes me to stay.

HUGO. I fear I can offer you little more at the moment, Carlotta, except perhaps curiosity, which is even less complimentary. I am what is called "set in my ways," which at my age is not entirely to be wondered at.

CARLOTTA. It implies resignation.

HUGO. Resignation has much to recommend it. Dignity, for one thing— (*Looking at her.*) a quality, alas, that is fast disappearing from our world.

CARLOTTA. I think I know what you're up to.

HUGO. (*Still secure on Olympus.*) I am open to any suggestions.

CARLOTTA. (*Moving to* C.) You are remodelling your public image. The witty, cynical author of so many best-sellers is making way for the Grand Old Man of Letters.

HUGO. Supposing your surmise to be accurate, do you consider such a transition reprehensible?

CARLOTTA. Of course not, if the process is inevitable and necessary. But aren't you jumping the gun a little?

HUGO. (*Patiently.*) No, Carlotta. I am not jumping the gun, or grasping Time by the forelock, or rushing my fences.

CARLOTTA. You must be prepared for a few clichés if you invite retired actresses to dinner.

HUGO. (*Ignoring her interruption.*) I am merely accepting, without due dismay, the fact of my own mortality. I am an old man and I at least have the sense to realize it.

CARLOTTA. Don't be waspish, my dear. Just as we are getting along so nicely. (*She crosses below* HUGO *to* L. *of the desk and stubs out her cigarette in the ashtray on it.*) At least you can congratulate yourself on having had a fabulously successful career. How wonderful to have been able to entertain and amuse so many millions of people for such a long time. No wonder you got a knighthood.

HUGO. I begin to suspect that you are here as an enemy. I hoped for a friend.

CARLOTTA. Did you, Hugo? Did you really?

HUGO. Perhaps I was wrong?

CARLOTTA. Why did you write so unkindly about me in your memoirs?

HUGO. Aha! Now I'm beginning to understand.

CARLOTTA. (*Cheerfully.*) Oh, no, you're not. You're merely jumping to conclusions. That was always one of your most glaring defects.

HUGO. Why can't we concentrate for a moment on some of my glaring assets? It might lighten the atmosphere.

CARLOTTA. We will, when you've answered my question.

HUGO. My autobiography was the assessment of the events and experiences of my life up to the date of writing it. I endeavoured to be as objective and truthful as possible. If in the process I happened to hurt your feelings, I apologize. There was no unkindness intended. I merely wrote what I thought to be true.

CARLOTTA. Your book may have been an assessment of the *outward* experiences of your life, but I cannot feel that you were entirely honest about your inner ones.

HUGO. Why should I be? My inner feelings are my own affair.

CARLOTTA. In that case the book was sailing under false colours.

HUGO. (*Nastily.*) And all this because I described you as a mediocre actress.

CARLOTTA. (*Serenely, rising to* L. *of* HUGO.) You don't happen to have any parchment lying about, do you?

HUGO. Parchment?

CARLOTTA. Yes. When zoological experts extract the venom from snakes they force them to bite on parchment.

HUGO. (*With a thin smile.*) I accept your rebuke.

CARLOTTA. (*Turning away.*) How generous of you.

HUGO. It's curious that you should still be able to arouse hostility in me.

CARLOTTA. Not really. As a matter of fact, it was always there, just below the surface. (*She sits* R. *on the sofa.*)

HUGO. When two young people are passionately in love a certain amount of bickering is inevitable. It even has charm, up to a point. But when the old indulge in it, it is merely tiresome.

CARLOTTA. Speak for yourself. You are the one who has decided to be old. I haven't yet; maybe I never shall. Some people remain young until they're ninety.

HUGO. You see no point in dignified withdrawal, in growing old gracefully?

CARLOTTA. There is little grace in growing old, Hugo. It's a dreary process that we all have to deal with in our different ways. To outside observers my way may seem stupid and garish and, later on perhaps, even grotesque. But the opinion of outside observers has never troubled me unduly. I am really only accountable to myself. I like slapping on the make-up and having my body massaged and my hair tinted. You've no idea how much I enjoy my long, complicated mornings. I admit I'm liable to cave in a bit by the late afternoon, but a short snooze

fixes that and then I have all the fun of getting ready again for the evening.

HUGO. And does the evening really justify so much effort?

CARLOTTA. As a general rule, yes. I have many friends, some of them quite young. They seem to enjoy my company. I like to watch them dancing.

HUGO. I detest the young of today. They are grubby, undisciplined and ill-mannered. They also make far too much noise.

CARLOTTA. Youth always makes too much noise. Many of the ones I know are better informed and more intelligent than we were. Also their world is more shrill than ours was. You really must make allowances.

HUGO. I'm too old to make allowances.

CARLOTTA. Oh, Hugo! You are positively stampeding towards the quiet grave, aren't you?

HUGO. (*Rising.*) Shall we change the subject? Shall we try to discover some general theme on which we can both agree? (*He goes to the drinks table for a cigarette.*)

CARLOTTA. Your indestructible elegance is flustering me and making me talk too much.

HUGO. (*Without malice.*) You always talked too much, Carlotta. (*He lights his cigarette.*)

CARLOTTA. Ah, yes. It's a compulsive disease. Useful at dinner-parties, but fatal in the home.

HUGO. As this is neither, you can afford to relax.

CARLOTTA. There's so much I want to know about you, about what's happened to you during these long years, and here I am talking you into the ground. Will you forgive me?

HUGO. Why is there so much that you want to know about me? Why are you so suddenly curious about what has happened to me during these long years? (*Moving to* L. *of the desk.*) Some motive must have impelled you to come here, some spark must have been struck. What is it that you want of me?

CARLOTTA. At the moment, dinner.

HUGO. (*With irritation, going to the window* R.) Carlotta!

CARLOTTA. I only had a salad for lunch and I'm famished.

HUGO. (*Moving to between the* C. *chair and the sofa. Resigned.*) Very well. Have it your own way. I am prepared to play any game you wish to play, up to a point. (*He moves* U. L.) But do remember, won't you, that I tire easily. (*He rings the bell.*) The dinner is ordered, anyhow. (*He moves to* R. *of the* C. *chair.*) I even remembered that you liked caviare.

CARLOTTA. That was sweet of you. The first time I ever tasted it was with you. You took me to Ciro's for supper after the show.

HUGO. Was I still wooing you then, or had I won?

CARLOTTA. You'd already won, more or less, but I think the caviare clinched it. I can remember what we had after the caviare too.

HUGO. What was it?

CARLOTTA. A filet mignon with sauce Bearnaise and a green salad, and then— (*She thinks for a moment.*) then a chocolate soufflé.

HUGO. Did we by any chance have pink champagne as well?

CARLOTTA. Yes. I believe we did.

HUGO. You will see in a moment with what nostalgic charm history can repeat itself.

CARLOTTA. Oh, Hugo! I don't believe you're really old at all.

(*There is a KNOCK on the doors* U. C.)

HUGO. Aventi.

(FELIX *enters* U. C. *with the dinner-trolley.* HUGO *stubs out his cigarette at the desk.*)

FELIX. Good evening, madame.

CARLOTTA. Good evening.
FELIX. The table in the usual place, sir?
HUGO. Yes, please, Felix.

(FELIX *wheels the table* D. C. *and adjusts it.* CARLOTTA *rises.* FELIX *brings the chair from the window* U. R. *and seats* CARLOTTA L. *of the table.* HUGO *fetches the chair from the desk and sits* R. *of the table.*)

FELIX. Madame.
CARLOTTA. (*Sitting.*) Thank you.

(FELIX *starts to open the vodka bottle.*)

HUGO. (*Stopping him.*) You can leave the vodka. We will serve ourselves.
FELIX. Bien, monsieur. (FELIX *gives a quick glance at the table to see that everything is all right, then bows and exits* U. C.)
CARLOTTA. How handsome he is, isn't he? Greek or Italian?
HUGO. (*Pouring out two vodkas.*) Half Italian and half Austrian, I believe.
CARLOTTA. He has just a slight look of my first husband Peter. Poor Peter. (HUGO *serves two helpings of caviare.*) His feet trod the world lightly and, alas, all too briefly.
HUGO. He was the one who was killed in an aeroplane?
CARLOTTA. Yes. He was studying to be a pilot in San Diego. I was trying out a new play in San Francisco. They had the sense not to tell me until after the matinée. (*She butters some toast.*)
HUGO. (*A little embarrassed by tragedy.*) How dreadful for you.
CARLOTTA. Yes. It was my first real sorrow. We'd only been married for eighteen months, too soon for the gold to rub away. Then a little while afterwards I had a miscarriage. That was my second real sorrow. It was quite a

year. San Francisco is a divine city and I love it, but I always seem to have bad luck when I play there. In nineteen fifty-seven I lost my last remaining tooth in the Curran Theatre.

HUGO. (*Banging down his fork with a shudder of distaste.*) Carlotta!

CARLOTTA. It was a gallant old stump that held my lower plate together. I remember saying to my understudy one day: "Lily, when this is out, you're on!" And sure enough, a week later, it was and she was.

HUGO. I don't wish to sound fussy, Carlotta, but I really don't care to discuss false teeth during dinner. (*He starts eating again.*)

CARLOTTA. (*Cheerfully.*) Why ever not? That's when they're a force to be reckoned with.

HUGO. Nevertheless, I should welcome a change of subject.

CARLOTTA. Dear Hugo, I am so sorry. I remember now, you always hated spades being called spades. What shall we talk about? Perhaps you would like some further vignettes from my rather ramshackle career?

HUGO. Provided that they are general rather than clinical.

CARLOTTA. Well, let me see now. My second husband, Vernon Ritchie, was my leading man in a ghastly play about the Deep South which ran for ages.

HUGO. (*Without much interest.*) Was he a good actor?

CARLOTTA. No, terrible. But he made up for his performances on the stage by his performances in— (*She hesitates.*) in the boudoir. I didn't say bed in order to spare your feelings.

HUGO. Thank you. I appreciate your delicacy.

CARLOTTA. He was a sweet man and I was very fond of him. He was the father of my son David, and then, soon after Pearl Harbour, when the war came to us in America, he joined the Navy and was killed in the Pacific in nineteen forty-four.

HUGO. Was that another "great sorrow"?

CARLOTTA. No. Just a sadness.

HUGO. What decided you to make your life in America rather than in Europe, where you were born?

CARLOTTA. Because I happened to be there, I suppose. I went there originally on account of you. It was your play, if you remember, that first deposited me on the Great White Way, where it ran exactly ten days.

HUGO. (*Loftily.*) That was no surprise to me. I never thought they'd understand it.

CARLOTTA. Do you know, Hugo? I have a terrible feeling that they did.

HUGO. Let me help you to some more caviare. (*He serves two more helpings.*)

CARLOTTA. Thank you.

HUGO. And you've never appeared in the London theatre since—since my first play?

CARLOTTA. Yes, twice.

HUGO. I don't remember hearing about it.

CARLOTTA. Why should you? As a matter of fact, on each occasion you were away, in the Far East, I believe, on one of your excavating expeditions.

HUGO. Excavating expeditions?

CARLOTTA. Yes, digging for treasure trove in the trusting minds of the innocent.

HUGO. You have a malicious tongue, Carlotta.

CARLOTTA. Yes, I really should learn to keep it between my false teeth. Let's stop talking about me now. Tell me about Hilde.

HUGO. I really see no reason to discuss Hilde with you.

CARLOTTA. Your loyal reticence does you credit, but it is a little overdone, almost defensive. After all, I'm not a newspaper reporter.

HUGO. You might easily be, judging by the tastelessness of some of your questions.

CARLOTTA. It's no use trying to intimidate me, Hugo, because it won't work. If you remember, it never did work. You have asked me questions about my husbands

and I didn't snap your head off. Why shouldn't I ask you about your wife?

HUGO. The analogy is a trifle strained.

CARLOTTA. I truly want to know, not from idle curiosity, but because I liked her. She has wisdom and repose and her eyes are kind, a little sad perhaps, but kind. I suspect tragedy in her life.

HUGO. Well, you're right; there was tragedy in her life. She managed to escape from Nazi Germany in nineteen forty, soon after the phoney war began. She left behind the love of her life, a young poet called Gerhardt Hendl. He died two years later in a concentration camp. Now, are you satisfied?

CARLOTTA. Satisfied is not quite the word I would have chosen. But I am pleased that you told me.

(FELIX *enters* U. C. *with the serving-trolley.*)

FELIX. Am I too early, sir?

HUGO. No, we've quite finished. (FELIX *brings the trolley to* C., *between the chair and the sofa.*) You'd better open the wine.

FELIX. Bien, monsieur. (*He opens the champagne and pours some for* HUGO *to taste.*)

CARLOTTA. Champagne! Oh, Hugo, I have a feeling it is going to be pink.

HUGO. It is.

CARLOTTA. How disarming of you to be so sentimental.

HUGO. (*Tasting the wine.*) Excellent.

(FELIX *pours* CARLOTTA *some champagne. Then he fills* HUGO'S *glass, standing above the table* C., *and puts the bottle and bucket on the floor.*)

CARLOTTA. Do you remember the cottage at Taplow and driving down together on summer nights after the show?

HUGO. Yes. Yes, I remember.

CARLOTTA. And how cross you were that night at the Grafton Galleries, when I appeared in a red sequin frock that Baby Briant had lent me? You said I looked like a Shaftesbury Avenue tart.

(FELIX *clears two caviare plates, the toast and butter plates to the trolley.*)

HUGO. You did.

(FELIX *clears the vodka and caviare dish to the trolley, then the vodka glasses, and places the salad bowls on the table.*)

CARLOTTA. And the week-end we went to Paris and I got to the theatre on the Monday night exactly seven minutes before curtain time? My understudy was all dressed and ready to go on. I often wonder why you didn't write any more plays. Your dialogue was so pointed and witty.

HUGO. You flatter me, Carlotta.

CARLOTTA. I've read everything you've ever written.

HUGO. You flatter me more than ever.

(FELIX *dishes up two steaks at the trolley.*)

CARLOTTA. I only said that I'd *read* everything you've ever written. I ventured no opinion, flattering or otherwise.

HUGO. The statement alone is flattering enough.

CARLOTTA. Yes. Yes, I expect it is. I suppose Ciro's isn't there any more?

(FELIX *serves* CARLOTTA'S *steak from her* L., *and* HUGO'S *from his* L.)

HUGO. Lots of things aren't there any more.

CARLOTTA. How right you are, Hugo. How right you are! (*She sighs.*) Oh dear!

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