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Nude with Violin

A Light Comedy in Three Acts

Noël Coward

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



**SAMUEL
FRENCH**
FOUNDED 1830

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NUDE WITH VIOLIN

STORY OF THE PLAY

Here is the latest confection from the pen of one of the most versatile writers of this era: witty, entertaining—and unmistakably Noël Coward. As it must to lesser men, death came even to the brilliant painter, Paul Sorodin. And indecently close to death's heels came Sorodin's bereaved relatives, his business manager, and all those others who, their grief not entirely untinged with greed, anxiously awaited the reading of the great man's will. It was the propitious moment for Sébastien, valet and companion extraordinary to Sorodin, to step in with some jolting surprises for the assembled "mourners." One of the jolts was a letter he produced making it clear that Paul Sorodin was not all he had seemed—which is a fine and merry way to start off a Coward play. Also on hand with a few revelations of their own were: an eccentric Russian Princess, an ex-show girl, an Eleventh Hour Immersionist (a very avant-garde religion), and a mute but effective gentleman named Fabrice. Before they got through, reputations were arranged and rearranged, Sébastien emerged with a tidy little nest egg for his old age—and delighted audiences both in London and New York had the time of their lives. *The smartest comedy of the season . . . bright and brittle humor, loads of laughs . . . "Nude With Violin" spells hilarity as slick as a seal's overcoat. Robert Coleman in the New York Daily Mirror.*

NUDE WITH VIOLIN, produced in America at the Belasco Theatre, 44th Street, New York, on November 14, 1957. It was presented by The Playwrights' Company and Lance Hamilton and Charles Russell, with the following cast:

SEBASTIEN	<i>Noël Coward</i>
MARIE-CELESTE	<i>Therese Quadri</i>
CLINTON PREMINGER, JUNIOR	<i>William Taylor</i>
ISOBEL SORODIN	<i>Joyce Carey</i>
JANE	<i>Angela Thornton</i>
COLIN	<i>John Ainsworth</i>
PAMELA	<i>Iola Lynn</i>
JACOB FRIEDLAND	<i>Morris Carnovsky</i>
ANYA PAVLIKOV	<i>Luba Malina</i>
CHERRY-MAY WATERTON	<i>Mona Washbourne</i>
FABRICE	<i>Robert Thurston</i>
OBADIAH LEWELLYN	<i>Cory Devlin</i>
GEORGE	<i>Robert Wark</i>
STOTESBURY	<i>Bobby Alford</i>

The play directed by
Noël Coward

with setting by
Oliver Smith

SCENES

*The action of the play takes place in Paul Sorodin's
Studio in Paris*

TIME

The Present.

ACT ONE

Afternoon.

ACT TWO

SCENE 1

A few hours later.

SCENE 2

The following afternoon.

ACT THREE

SCENE 1

A few hours later.

SCENE 2

The following morning.

Nude with Violin

ACT ONE

SETTING: *The scene is PAUL SORODIN's studio in Paris. It is large and luxuriously furnished. There are some fine paintings and sculptures but no evidence of SORODIN's own work. In the Center there are two double doors which open into a hall and thence to the front door. Down Right a small door leads to the library. Above this is a solid writing-desk. The Left wall is taken up by a vast window through which can be seen trees and the roofs of houses in the distance. A couple of modern armchairs and a sofa are placed at the director's discretion. There is a refectory table under the window set with cakes and sandwiches and a magnum of champagne ornamented with a large black bow.*

AT RISE: *When the CURTAIN rises it is about four o'clock on a summer afternoon in the year 1954. After a moment or two, SEBASTIEN LACRÉOLE enters, bearing two plates of patisserie. He is a dark, rather swarthy man and might be any age between forty and fifty-five. He is impeccably dressed in black trousers and a white coat, on the left sleeve of which there is a wide mourning band of black silk. As he puts the plates on the table the TELEPHONE rings. He goes to it.*

SEBASTIEN. (*At telephone.*) Allô—J'écoute—ici Invalides 2645—Oui, monsieur—Non, monsieur—Oui, monsieur, je suis complètement d'accord: pour nous c'est une tragédie mais pour le monde, une catastrophe. Merci, monsieur—Monsieur est trop aimable—Sans faute, monsieur—Au revoir, monsieur. (*He hangs up the receiver*

and is about to return to the table when the FRONT DOOR BELL rings. He crosses and opens the drapes. MARIE-CELESTE, a middle-aged "Bonne," enters.)

MARIE-CELESTE. Il y a un monsieur à la porte.

SEBASTIEN. Quelle espèce de monsieur?

MARIE-CELESTE. Je ne sais pas, je ne suis pas clairvoyante moi, je crois qu'il est Anglais ou peut-être Américain.

SEBASTIEN. Journaliste?

MARIE-CELESTE. Écoutes, mon coco, comment est ce-que je peux te dire? Je lui ai dit rien que Bon Jour.

SEBASTIEN. Merde!

MARIE-CELESTE. D'accord. Je m'en fou de tout ce bruit.

CLINTON. (*At this moment CLINTON PREMINGER, junior, comes tentatively into the room. He is an earnest-looking young American in the late twenties or early thirties. Laboriously.*) Excusez-moi.

SEBASTIEN. Monsieur?

CLINTON. Parlez-vous anglais?

SEBASTIEN. Yes, monsieur.

CLINTON. Thank God. (MARIE-CELESTE *exits.*)

SEBASTIEN. This is a house of mourning, monsieur.

CLINTON. I know. That's why I'm here—I mean I have to see Madame Sorodin, it's business—urgent business.

SEBASTIEN. Madame Sorodin has not yet returned from the funeral and when she does I feel that she will be in no mood to discuss business, however urgent.

CLINTON. I guess you're Sébastien.

SEBASTIEN. Your guess is correct, monsieur.

CLINTON. I have some notes on you.

SEBASTIEN. Have you indeed?

CLINTON. I represent *Life* Magazine.

SEBASTIEN. It is in questionable taste to force *Life* Magazine into a house of death, monsieur.

CLINTON. My name is Clinton Preminger, junior.

SEBASTIEN. It would be all the same if you were Clinton Preminger, senior.

CLINTON. Now see here, I'm not an ordinary press reporter out for scoop headlines, I'm a serious writer.

SEBASTIEN. I am delighted to hear it.

CLINTON. For over two years I've been assembling material for a comprehensive study of Sorodin and his paintings. It's to be called "Triton among the Minnows."

SEBASTIEN. Most appropriate.

CLINTON. I came by sea to give myself time to get all my notes in order and when I landed at Cherbourg I found that he had died. You can imagine the shock!

SEBASTIEN. It was a shock to the whole world, monsieur.

MARIE-CELESTE. (*Entering from service door with a jar of pâté.*) Il est beau gars, qu'est-ce qu'il dit?

SEBASTIEN. (*Crossing to MARIE-CELESTE and taking the pâté.*) Rien d'importance . . . sauve toi!

MARIE-CELESTE. Bon. Je me sauve. (*She goes out.*)

SEBASTIEN. You say you have some notes on me? What sort of notes?

CLINTON. Merely factual. I have them here in my file — just a moment. (*Looks in file.*) S. S. Sébastien.

SEBASTIEN. I sound like an Atlantic liner.

CLINTON. Sébastien Lacreeole. Is that right?

SEBASTIEN. Not quite. There should be an accent on the first E in Lacreole.

CLINTON. My French isn't too good.

SEBASTIEN. You must persevere.

CLINTON. (*Consulting his notes.*) You entered the service of Paul Sorodin in July 1946 in the capacity of valet.

SEBASTIEN. Correct.

CLINTON. You don't talk like a valet.

SEBASTIEN. You can't have everything.

CLINTON. You are of mixed parentage.

SEBASTIEN. You have a genius for understatement, monsieur.

CLINTON. Born in Martinique, date uncertain.

SEBASTIEN. My whole life has been uncertain.

CLINTON. (*Still at his notes.*) Deported from Syria in 1929. No offence specified.

SEBASTIEN. The Syrians are terribly vague.

CLINTON. Imprisoned in Saigon 1933. Offence specified.

SEBASTIEN. (*Reminiscently.*) I remember it well.

CLINTON. Resident in England 1936.

SEBASTIEN. The happiest time of my life.

CLINTON. Landed in Los Angeles 1937.

SEBASTIEN. The saddest.

CLINTON. Married in Rio de Janeiro 1939. Wife living.

SEBASTIEN. With a customs officer.

CLINTON. From 1942 to 1946, proprietor of a rooming-house in Mexico City.

SEBASTIEN. Your delicacy does you credit, monsieur.

CLINTON. (*Closing file.*) Those are all my notes on you up to date.

SEBASTIEN. Quite accurate as far as they go.

CLINTON. (*Earnestly.*) I'd like you to understand that by reading them to you I had no intention of embarrassing you.

SEBASTIEN. Thank you. You didn't.

CLINTON. I despise moral attitudes. I believe that life is for living, don't you?

SEBASTIEN. It's difficult to know what else one could do with it.

CLINTON. Personally I have no inhibitions. I took a course of psychiatry at Yale.

SEBASTIEN. That explains everything.

CLINTON. I've studied Jung and Freud and Adler and Kinsey and all the big boys.

SEBASTIEN. Mr. Kinsey himself studied quite a number of the big boys.

CLINTON. What I mean to say is that nothing shocks me. I think that every man should do what he wants to do.

SEBASTIEN. A tolerant philosophy but apt to lead to untidiness.

CLINTON. Where did you learn to speak such good English?

SEBASTIEN. The Esplanade Hotel, Bournemouth.

CLINTON. What were you doing there?

SEBASTIEN. Looking after an elderly lady. No offence specified.

CLINTON. You liked working for Paul Sorodin?

SEBASTIEN. Very much indeed, monsieur. He was a great man.

CLINTON. Was he difficult, temperamental? I mean did he fly into violent rages?

SEBASTIEN. Frequently.

CLINTON. Did he ever strike you?

SEBASTIEN. No. He once threw a pork chop at me but it only broke the clock.

CLINTON. (*Scribbling a note.*) Excuse me.

SEBASTIEN. I really think, Monsieur Preminger, that as Madame Sorodin may return from Père-Lachaise at any moment, it would be tactful of you to leave now. The presence here of a stranger would be an intrusion on her grief.

CLINTON. Grief? Just a moment— (*He searches through his file, finds a paper and scans it.*) Sorodin deserted her in 1926, didn't he?

SEBASTIEN. 1925.

CLINTON. And she hasn't seen him since?

SEBASTIEN. I believe that they once met by accident in the Galeries Lafayette.

CLINTON. I shouldn't imagine she'd be suffering much grief after all those years.

SEBASTIEN. (*Reprovingly.*) He was her husband and the father of her children.

CLINTON. Why did she never divorce him?

SEBASTIEN. She is a woman of the highest principles, and a Catholic.

CLINTON. Can you beat that?

SEBASTIEN. People have tried, monsieur, but seldom with unqualified success.

CLINTON. Tell me. Did he hate her?

SEBASTIEN. Not at all. He once painted a moustache on her photograph but only in a spirit of fun.

CLINTON. (*Rising.*) You know, I like you, Sébastien.

SEBASTIEN. Thank you.

CLINTON. I really am crazy to meet Madame Sorodin. Can I stay until she arrives if I promise to go the moment you tip me the wink?

SEBASTIEN. It would be as much as my place is worth.

CLINTON. But your place can't be worth much now anyway, can it?

SEBASTIEN. That remains to be seen.

CLINTON. Are you taken care of in the will?

SEBASTIEN. Mr. Sorodin left no will.

CLINTON. Gosh! That means that everything will go to her, doesn't it?

SEBASTIEN. I presume so.

CLINTON. No wonder she came haring over here for the public funeral.

SEBASTIEN. Your flippancy appals me, monsieur.

CLINTON. Do you like her?

SEBASTIEN. I am in no position to say, having only just met her.

CLINTON. Does she like you?

SEBASTIEN. I doubt it, monsieur. Paul Sorodin was more than my employer, he was my friend. I travelled with him far and wide. He found me good company: we laughed together and drank together and took our pleasures lightly. Whether Madame Sorodin liked me or not I am fairly sure that she could never approve of me. Our views of life are so diametrically opposed.

CLINTON. I'll bet the hell they are.

(*The TELEPHONE rings.*)

SEBASTIEN. Excuse me. (*He goes to telephone.*) Allô j'écoute—ici Invalides 2645—Si Señor—Aun no, Señor—Si Señor, estamos completamente de acuerdo, para nosotros es una tragedia, pero para el mundo es una catástrofe—Muchas gracias Señor—Usted es muy amable Señor—Sin falta Señor—Hasta luego Señor. (*He hangs up.*)

CLINTON. How many languages do you speak?

SEBASTIEN. Fourteen, including dialects. My Swahili

is a bit rusty at the moment; there are so few opportunities of speaking it in Paris.

CLINTON. Was Sorodin a linguist?

SEBASTIEN. Only when he was drunk.

CLINTON. Was he a heavy drinker?

SEBASTIEN. In certain circumstances, yes, but sometimes he would go for hours without touching a drop.

CLINTON. Are you laughing at me by any chance?

SEBASTIEN. A little, Monsieur Preminger.

CLINTON. Why? What is there about me that's so funny?

SEBASTIEN. Your naïveté, monsieur. If, as you say, you intend to write a serious biography of Paul Sorodin I cannot help feeling that your approach should be a trifle less ingenuous.

CLINTON. My approach is logical. Facts first, analysis afterwards. You must know more about him than anybody. You could help me a lot if only you would.

SEBASTIEN. Why should I?

CLINTON. For the sake of posterity, if for no other reason.

SEBASTIEN. Sorodin will be remembered even without the aid of *Life Magazine*, Monsieur Preminger, and within a few years your biography of him will only be one among hundreds. (*The FRONT DOOR BELL rings.*) Here they are. You'd better go.

CLINTON. Five minutes, just five minutes—you promised.

SEBASTIEN. I did no such thing.

CLINTON. Please. I swear I'll go the moment you give me the hint.

SEBASTIEN. What sort of hint can I possibly give you?

CLINTON. Offer me a cigarette. I shall refuse it and leave at once.

SEBASTIEN. (*Weakening.*) It is all highly irregular.

CLINTON. Please. Be a pal. It means so much to me. And call me at the hotel later and we can make a date for dinner.

SEBASTIEN. Which hotel?

CLINTON. The George V.

SEBASTIEN. I might have known it.

CLINTON. Okay?

SEBASTIEN. (*Resigned.*) Okay.

(MARIE-CELESTE flings open the double doors and stands aside to allow ISOBEL, JANE, COLIN, PAMELA and JACOB FRIEDLAND to enter. They are all, naturally, in mourning. ISOBEL, a woman in the early fifties, is a fairly typical example of the English upper middle-class. Her clothes are well cut but in no way remarkable. At the moment she looks a trifle harassed. She sits in the armchair. COLIN, her son, although not in uniform, is quite unmistakably a major in the Army; he stands behind ISOBEL. PAMELA, his wife, is equally unmistakably the wife of a major in the Army. She has a forthright manner and is accustomed to speaking her mind which limits the scope of her conversation. JANE differs from her mother and brother in that she has a definite style of her own and a sense of humour which perhaps she has inherited from her father. JACOB FRIEDLAND, an art dealer of considerable renown, is dapper, shrewd and kindly enough although his manner is inclined to be pompous and didactic on occasion.)

ISOBEL. (*As she comes in.*) It was all very impressive and really very moving but I am thankful that it is over.

MARIE-CELESTE. Madame a besoin de quelque chose? Un cachet Faivre peut-être?

ISOBEL. No—non merci beaucoup. (MARIE-CELESTE retires.)

JACOB. (*Seeing CLINTON. To SEBASTIEN.*) Who is this?

SEBASTIEN. Monsieur Clinton Preminger, junior, monsieur. He represents *Life Magazine*.

JACOB. I thought my instructions were quite clear, Sébastien.

CLINTON. Please don't blame him, sir, it's all my fault. He tried to make me go but I wouldn't.

JACOB. I am afraid I must ask you to leave immediately. This is a moment when privacy should be respected.

CLINTON. Are you Mr. Jacob Friedland?

JACOB. I am.

CLINTON. I have some notes on you.

JACOB. Kindly show Mr. Preminger out, Sébastien.

CLINTON. Just a moment, please. Mrs. Sorodin, I appeal to you. I am writing a series of articles on your late husband's work. I know that you have lived apart from him for many years but you must still feel in your heart a little tenderness for him, you who once held him in your arms—

SEBASTIEN. A cigarette, Monsieur Preminger?

CLINTON. (*Absently taking one.*) Thanks.

JACOB. Mr. Preminger—

CLINTON. And you, Mr. Friedland. You who braved the ignorant scorn of his early critics and set his feet so firmly on the ladder of success.

SEBASTIEN. (*With an edge to his voice.*) A light, Monsieur Preminger? For your cigarette!

CLINTON. (*Automatically.*) Thanks. (SEBASTIEN *shrugs his shoulders and lights his cigarette.*) Please help me, Mr. Friedland, in the same spirit that you have helped and encouraged talent all your life—Mrs. Sorodin, I appeal to you again—

ISOBEL. (*Flustered.*) Oh dear—this is really most awkward—I don't know what to say—Jane—Colin—

COLIN. I'll deal with this. (*To CLINTON.*) Now look here, young man. I don't care what magazine you represent or who you are or where you come from, but if you don't leave this house within fifty seconds I'll throw you out.

JACOB. Just a moment, Colin. (*To CLINTON.*) I fully appreciate your position, Mr. Preminger, and I will do all I can to help you on condition that you leave us alone now in the private sorrow that has come to us.

CLINTON. (*Carried away.*) It's not a private sorrow, it's a public disaster!

SEBASTIEN. (*Menacingly.*) Another cigarette, Monsieur Preminger?

COLIN. What the devil do you keep offering him cigarettes for?

CLINTON. (*Stricken.*) Cigarette!—My God!—Sorry, Sébastien. Good-bye. (*He goes rapidly out of the room.*)

PAMELA. (*After a slight pause.*) The man's obviously a lunatic.

SEBASTIEN. No, madame, merely an enthusiast. He took a course of psychiatry at Yale.

PAMELA. What's Yale?

ISOBEL. It's a university in America, dear, just like Cambridge you know only quite different.

COLIN. He'd have been better advised to take a course in manners.

JACOB. You had no business to let him in, Sébastien. I am very displeased.

COLIN. I suppose he bribed you.

JANE. (*Frowning.*) Really, Colin.

SEBASTIEN. I am not in the habit of accepting bribes, sir.

JANE. I'm sure you're not, Sébastien.

SEBASTIEN. Thank you, miss.

JANE. Where did you learn to speak such perfect English?

SEBASTIEN. In Bournemouth, miss. I was in service there some years ago.

PAMELA. Domestic service?

SEBASTIEN. Some of my duties were almost overwhelmingly domestic. May I offer Mesdames, Messieurs some refreshment?

JANE. I must say I should love a drink, it's been a very tiring day.

SEBASTIEN. (*Picks up magnum of champagne from bar table.*) Champagne, miss?

JANE. Yes please, that would be lovely.

COLIN. Good Lord! A Magnum! Where did that come from?

SEBASTIEN. It was a Christmas present from Mr. Soro-

din. I wished to contribute in my own humble way to this melancholy but historic occasion. (*To ISOBEL.*) I hope Madame will accept it in the spirit in which it is offered?

ISOBEL. Really—I hardly know what to say—thank you, Sébastien—hand me my bag, Pamela dear, if I am going to have champagne I must take off my hat.

SEBASTIEN. (*Opens bottle and fills glasses.*) I would like to repudiate the black bow. It was Marie-Céleste's idea. She has an exaggerated sense of *fantaisie*. (*ISOBEL takes off her hat and pats her hair into place with the aid of her hand mirror.*)

JANE. (*Handing ISOBEL a glass of wine.*) Here, mother, it will do you good. (*The champagne is handed round.*)

ISOBEL. I doubt that, Jane. Champagne really doesn't agree with me, the last time I had any was at poor Ettie's wedding—you remember, Colin—I was ill for days.

JACOB. Perhaps it was a bad year.

ISOBEL. Oh indeed it was, everything went wrong.

JANE. You must drink, too, Sébastien.

SEBASTIEN. Thank you, miss, I will be honoured.

JACOB. By all means. Fill a glass for him, Colin. (*COLIN fills a wine glass.*)

SEBASTIEN. May I be permitted to propose a toast?

COLIN. Oh God! (*Handing glass to SEBASTIEN.*)

JANE. Shut up, Colin. Please do, Sébastien.

SEBASTIEN. (*Raising his glass.*) I drink to the memory of my master Paul Sorodin. A man of charm and humour and courage: a man who, until death smudged out the twinkle in his eye, contrived to enjoy life to the full and at the same time remain a hero to his own valet. Madame. Ladies and Gentlemen. Paul Sorodin. (*He drains his glass in one gulp, dashes it to the floor and goes swiftly out of the room.*)

PAMELA. (*After a slight pause.*) Well really—what a funny thing to do!

ISOBEL. A little theatrical perhaps, dear, but after all he is a foreigner.

PAMELA. I can't stand him, it's no use I just can't stand him. He gives me the creeps.

JANE. I rather like him.

PAMELA. Really, Jane, what is there about him that you could possibly like?

JANE. He has charm, I think.

COLIN. (*Contemptuously.*) Charm! The chap's a Dago. I wouldn't trust him an inch.

PAMELA. A strong touch of the tar brush, if you ask me.

JANE. Nobody did, Pamela.

PAMELA. There is no need to be rude.

JANE. Father was obviously devoted to him.

COLIN. He looks a thoroughly sinister type to me.

JANE. We have no proof that Sébastian is a sinister type. We met him for the first time two days ago.

COLIN. You have only to look at him. I know the sort. Oily.

JANE. I liked what he said about father.

ISOBEL. I know that over the years you have built up in your mind a romantic conception of your father, Jane darling—

JANE. He was a romantic man.

ISOBEL. I also know, modern values being what they are, that you can see nothing wrong in the unprincipled life he chose to lead.

JANE. Men of genius see life in their own terms; their principles are different from those of ordinary people.

ISOBEL. I am sure I have no wish to argue with you, but I do think you might spare a little of your loyalty to your poor mother, rather than devote it all to the man who betrayed her and made her life a hell upon earth.

COLIN. Hear, hear.

JANE. (*Smiling.*) Darling mother, what absolute nonsense! You lived with father for exactly six years. Admittedly your life may have been a bit difficult for that very brief period, but since then it has been extremely comfortable.

ISOBEL. I have no intention of pursuing this discussion

any further, Jane, it is really most unsuitable considering why we are here and everything.

JANE. Did you love my father, Jacob?

JACOB. His impact on my world, the world of Art, was stupendous; his influence far reaching and incalculable.

JANE. But you were fond of him—as a man I mean? Did you look forward to seeing him, to dining with him? Was he gay and attractive and good company?

JACOB. He could be all those things when he chose.

PAMELA. But his paintings! I know I'm ignorant and don't know anything about art really, but what do they mean? I've never been able to understand.

JACOB. (*Portentously.*) Go into the Tate Gallery, my dear, and look at Sorodin's "Portrait of Marjorie." Stand before it quietly, receptively. Stand for an hour, two hours, three hours if need be, then go away.

PAMELA. Three hours is an awfully long time.

JACOB. It takes a lifetime to appreciate a masterpiece.

COLIN. Is "Portrait of Marjorie" the one with all those rings and dots?

JACOB. It is the apotheosis of his "Circular" period. One of the few great modern paintings in the world.

COLIN. But why is it called "Portrait of Marjorie"? It isn't a portrait at all. I mean it isn't like anyone or anything.

JACOB. (*Patiently.*) It is Sorodin's abstract conception of a woman called Marjorie.

PAMELA. Marjorie who?

JANE. Does it matter?

JACOB. (*Giving up.*) The fact remains that the Tate bought "Portrait of Marjorie" for three thousand pounds in 1936. It would be worth treble the amount today.

COLIN. Well, it's beyond me, that's all I can say, I can't make head or tail of it.

JACOB. Sorodin's creative genius was concentrated into three great periods. The first, what is now described as his "Farouche" period, lasted from 1927 until the early thirties. His first exhibition caused an uproar. There were

jeers and catcalls. One elderly art critic struck at one of the canvases with his umbrella. A lady from Des Moines, Iowa, fainted dead away and had to be taken to the American hospital.

ISOBEL. Poor thing. That's where they took poor Edith Carrington when she had that dreadful rash.

JACOB. The "Circular" period was an evolution and a reaction at the same time. Through the dark years of the war I had no message from him. Indeed I imagined he must be dead. It was not until he returned to Paris in 1946 that I realised the full significance of the private war he had been waging with his own genius, a struggle that resulted in the greatest victory of his career. The "Jamaican" period.

COLIN. All those fat negresses?

JACOB. (*Sharply.*) Yes, all those fat negresses, all that primitive simplicity and glorious colour as well. The first painting he showed me on that fabulous day is now in the Louvre.

JANE. "Girl with Breadfruit"?

JACOB. No. "Boy with Plantain." "Girl with Breadfruit" is in Prague.

ISOBEL. That was the one we used for our Christmas cards the year before last, you remember, Colin? Your Aunt Freda wrote "Indecent" on it in red ink and sent it back.

SEBASTIEN. (*Enters.*) You rang, madame?

JACOB. No, Sébastien. Nobody rang.

SEBASTIEN. How curious! I was certain I heard a bell. Perhaps it was a bicycle. Have you everything you want?

JACOB. Yes, thank you.

SEBASTIEN. Perhaps Madame would care for a little caviar?

ISOBEL. No thank you, Sébastien.

SEBASTIEN. We still have several tins left over. Professor Vladimir Kashkov used to have it flown to us regularly from Moscow in the diplomatic pouch. He was an ardent admirer of Mr. Sorodin.

COLIN. Diplomatic pouch?

SEBASTIEN. (*With a smile.*) Yes. He was a spy in the American Embassy, until he was transferred.

COLIN. You mean that my father was in the habit of accepting presents from a Communist traitor?

SEBASTIEN. Your father was in the habit of accepting presents from anyone who chose to give them to him, sir. Right up to the last he used to look forward to his birthday with the enthusiastic exuberance of a small boy. It was one of his most endearing characteristics.

COLIN. Endearing characteristics my foot. He ought to have been ashamed of himself.

SEBASTIEN. (*Reprovingly.*) That would never have occurred to him, sir, in any circumstances whatsoever.

JANE. Do try not to be so overbearingly truculent, Colin.

SEBASTIEN. Mr. Sorodin was temperamentally incapable of political prejudice. Also, he was devoted to caviar.

ISOBEL. Personally I can never understand what people see in it. It's so fishy.

SEBASTIEN. (*Charmingly.*) Almost everything that comes from Russia nowadays is liable to be a bit fishy, madame.

JACOB. You say this Professor what's-his-name was transferred. Where was he transferred to?

SEBASTIEN. He is at present serving on a security commission in Washington, sir. (*Goes out.*)

COLIN. Well I'll be damned!

ISOBEL. Hush, Colin. I'm afraid your poor father was always attracted to disreputable characters. Do you remember, Jacob, that dreadful Rumanian with a guitar? He stayed in the house for weeks until I put my foot down.

JANE. (*Laughing.*) More champagne, mother?

ISOBEL. No thank you, dear.

JANE. (*Rising.*) I'd like some more and I'm sure Jacob would. He's had a horrid week dealing with everything. (*She goes to the table.*)

ISOBEL. You've been most considerate, Jacob, to make all the arrangements and support me through today's ordeal. I could never have endured it without you.

JANE. You really shouldn't have come, mother.

ISOBEL. Nonsense, dear, it was my duty.

JANE. Personally I think it was unnecessary. Nobody was deceived.

ISOBEL. What a disagreeable thing to say, Jane. I'm sure I had no wish to deceive anyone.

COLIN. Jane's been in a bad mood all day, argumentative and thoroughly tiresome. (*To JANE.*) Why don't you snap out of it?

JANE. I haven't been anything of the sort, but I hated us being here, I hated the whole business, all those crowds and press cameras and professional mourners. I felt ashamed.

JACOB. It was most important from every point of view for Paul Sorodin's widow and children to be present at his funeral.

JANE. Every point of view but father's.

ISOBEL. Really, Jane.

JANE. He'd have thought we were hypocrites, as indeed we were.

ISOBEL. I resent your attitude, Jane. Your father was my husband—

JANE. He wouldn't have been if only you had divorced him when he wanted you to, years ago.

PAMELA. I must say this is hardly the moment to go into all that.

ISOBEL. Pamela is quite right. This is indeed no moment to go into that. You should be ashamed of yourself.

JANE. I am, I've already said so, I'm ashamed of us all. Allowing ourselves to be photographed all ends up looking like a lot of black crows.

COLIN. Why don't you stop upsetting mother? She has enough to put up with, God knows.

JANE. She has nothing whatever to put up with. I don't blame her for hating father, we all know he behaved

badly to her in the past and deserted her and made her miserable, but all that was years and years ago.

COLIN. What's the point of raking it all up now, then?

JANE. What I do blame her for is not setting him free when he wanted to be set free and on top of that making us all come traipsing over here to cash in on his death.

ISOBEL. Once and for all, Jane, I forbid you to talk like that. You are perfectly well aware that even if I had been willing to divorce your father, to have done so would directly have contravened the canons of my Faith. I know you have grown apart from us during the last few years, I expect it is my fault, everything is always my fault. But I must say I have been deeply grieved by your attitude to me throughout all this trying ordeal. I feel utterly exhausted. Colin, will you and Pamela take me back to the hotel. I have no more to say.

JANE. I'm sorry, mother. I didn't mean to grieve you, but I do wish you could see my point just a little.

ISOBEL. You should never have taken that Journalism course at the Polytechnic, it's ruined your character.

JANE. Oh, mother, you are funny, really you are.

ISOBEL. I'm sure I don't see anything to laugh at.

JANE. Are you really cross or only pretending to be?

ISOBEL. I don't know what you mean.

JANE. Well, you've been pretending to be sad all day, I see no reason why you shouldn't be pretending to be upset now.

ISOBEL. (*Rising.*) Come, Colin. (COLIN *rises.*)

JANE. (*Sitting ISOBEL down again.*) You can't possibly go away before we've decided what's to be done about Sébastien.

COLIN. Sébastien? What are you talking about? Why should anything be done about him?

JANE. Father left no will. Sébastien served him faithfully during his last years. Something will have to be done about him.

PAMELA. I expect he has taken good care to feather his own nest.

JANE. Jacob. Do you agree with me?

JACOB. There is certainly something in what you say.

COLIN. Pay him a month's wages and good riddance.

JANE. That's not enough. We're leaving first thing in the morning. It must be settled before we go.

PAMELA. I agree with Colin. Give him a month's wages and send him away with a flea in his ear.

JANE. He must have a pension.

COLIN. Pension! You must be out of your mind.

JANE. It's a question of common decency. Mother, you as father's widow cannot afford to appear mean in the eyes of the world. You can't repay his years of devotion to father with a month's wages. What do you think, Jacob?

JACOB. In the circumstances I think Jane is right.

COLIN. Well, I'm damned if I do.

PAMELA. Neither do I.

ISOBEL. Is that your considered opinion, Jacob?

JACOB. Yes. I think he should be given the choice of a pension or a lump sum, whichever he prefers.

ISOBEL. Oh dear. Well, if you really feel it's necessary, I suppose we must agree. Will you interview him?

JACOB. Willingly. But I think it would be more tactful if you told him yourself.

ISOBEL. I have already told you I'm tired, Jacob. I want to go back to the hotel and lie down.

JACOB. He is a very articulate man, Isobel. There is nothing to prevent him giving all sorts of interviews to the Press. A gesture from you at this particular moment would, I am sure, be a wise move.

ISOBEL. (*Resigned.*) Very well. Ring for him.

COLIN. (*Presses the bell near the service door.*) Bear up, mother. We can always rely on you to say the right thing.

ISOBEL. Thank you, dear.

SEBASTIEN. (*Comes into the room. He is wearing an expression of polite subservience.*) You rang, madame?

ISOBEL. (*In command.*) Yes, Sébastien. I wish to speak to you for a moment.

SEBASTIEN. At your service, madame.

ISOBEL. First of all I want to thank you for the—er—loyal service you gave my late husband. I would like to say that I find your obvious devotion to him touching, really most touching.

SEBASTIEN. Thank you, madame.

ISOBEL. As you are no doubt aware, Mr. Sorodin left no will.

SEBASTIEN. Yes, madame. I am aware of that.

ISOBEL. And—er—realising that his sudden death might have left you in an embarrassing situation—

SEBASTIEN. In what way, madame?

ISOBEL. (*With an effort.*) Financially.

SEBASTIEN. The financial aspect has not yet occurred to me. Doubtless it will later.

ISOBEL. (*Flummoxed.*) Oh.

SEBASTIEN. I have frequently been embarrassed in my life, madame, but more often by lack of taste than by lack of money. (*The TELEPHONE rings.*) Excuse me. (*He goes to it and lifts the receiver.*) Allô: J'écoute—ici Invalides 2645—Ja, mein Herr—Nein, mein Herr—Ja, ich bin vollkommen Ihrer Meinung—für uns ist es eine Tragödie, für die Welt, aber, ist es eine Katastrophe—Ja, mein Herr—Ich danke Ihnen. (*He laughs heartily.*) Auf Wiedersehen, mein Herr. (*He hangs up.*)

JACOB. What was all that about?

SEBASTIEN. Merely a message of condolence, sir. That was Herr Otto Grunschnabel, the director of the "Health in Art" Centre in Hamburg. It is a really remarkable organisation. All art students of both sexes between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five are taken in groups into the fields twice a week to establish contact with natural phenomena and acquire physical fitness at the same time.

JANE. I didn't know there were any fields in Hamburg.

SEBASTIEN. There aren't. They go by electric train and trudge back in formation, dragging their easels. Herr Grunschnabel was a great friend of Mr. Sorodin's. When we were in Germany he used to supply us with models.

COLIN. (*Contemptuously.*) Models!

SEBASTIEN. A comprehensive term, sir. (*To ISOBEL.*) You were about to say, madame?—

ISOBEL. I was about to say that, in consideration of your services to my late husband, Mr. Friedland and I have decided to offer you the choice of a sum of money to be paid in the near future, or—or a small pension. Which would you prefer?

SEBASTIEN. Without wishing to be discourteous, neither, madame.

PAMELA. Well, really!

SEBASTIEN. Please believe me when I say how profoundly I appreciate your kindness and consideration. To you, Miss Jane, and you, Mr. Friedland, I must also express my gratitude. I happened to be listening outside the door just now when the matter was being discussed.

COLIN. Typical! Exactly what I should have expected.

JANE. (*Amused.*) That was disgraceful of you, Sébastien.

SEBASTIEN. You will understand therefore how much it pains me, in the face of such spontaneous generosity—to be the bearer of what I fear will be most disturbing news.

JACOB. Disturbing news! What do you mean?

SEBASTIEN. "Ah what a dusty answer gets the soul when hot for certainties in this our life."

COLIN. What on earth are you talking about?

SEBASTIEN. That was Mr. George Meredith's rather involved way of saying, sir, "The best laid schemes O' mice and men gang aft agley." Although Mr. Sorodin left no will, he *did* leave a letter.

JACOB. Letter?

SEBASTIEN. A personal letter addressed to me. It was written in the early hours of the morning of January the First of this year and was witnessed by Marie-Céleste and the head waiter from the "Grâce à Dieu." He had organized the catering.

COLIN. Catering?

SEBASTIEN. We had given a little party. Nothing grandiose you understand, just a small gathering of intimate

friends, quite informal. In fact it was so informal one of the guests—

JACOB. (*Obviously disturbed.*) Never mind about that. What is all this leading up to?

COLIN. Blackmail. I can smell it a mile off.

JACOB. Where is this letter?

SEBASTIEN. In a strong box in the Royal Bank of Canada. But I have a copy of it.

JACOB. (*Authoritatively.*) Let me see it, please.

SEBASTIEN. No, monsieur. That would be a betrayal of confidence. Also it is very long and contains many irrelevancies of a personal nature. I am, however, perfectly prepared to read you any extracts that are pertinent to the present circumstances.

JACOB. What is the meaning of all this? What are you up to?

SEBASTIEN. I am not up to anything. I am merely embarrassed, for reasons that will be only too apparent later on.

JACOB. Come to the point, please. Read the letter.

SEBASTIEN. (*Looking at ISOBEL.*) Have I madame's permission?

ISOBEL. (*Agitated.*) I suppose so—Jacob—what am I to say?

JACOB. (*To SEBASTIEN.*) You have madame's permission to proceed.

COLIN. There's something shady about this.

JANE. Shut up, Colin.

JACOB. (*Impatiently.*) Go on.

SEBASTIEN. (*With a slight shrug.*) Very well. Actually I would have preferred to read it to you or to your lawyer in private, Monsieur Friedland. However, if you insist, I have no choice. Just a moment. (*In tense silence he produces a wad of papers from his left coat pocket, glances through them, scrutinizing the names or addresses on each of them, doesn't find what he is looking for, and puts them back—takes another wad from his right pocket, goes through them, discovers post card of a nude*

woman, slyly shows it to COLIN—and audience—then puts wad back in his pocket, going finally to another wad of papers in his inner pocket, glances through them, extracts a typewritten letter and places the rest carefully back in his pocket. He clears his throat and looks at everyone with a slight smile.) Ready?

COLIN. For God's sake get on with it.

SEBASTIEN. (*Reading.*) "My dear Sébastien. In case the validity of this personal letter to you should ever be questioned, I will begin it by stating that I am sane and healthy and in full possession of my faculties—" (*He looks up.*) Actually he had a slight head cold at the time, but I gave him two tablets of Benedril, a nice hot toddy, tucked him up in bed—with a friend of his—and piff paff—

JACOB. Never mind about that—go on.

JANE. The news in your letter must be very bad, Sébastien, you are so obviously enjoying yourself.

SEBASTIEN. Not exactly bad, Miss Jane. Shall we say—startling!

JACOB. (*Almost shouting.*) Read it!

SEBASTIEN. (*Continuing to read.*) "In the event of my demise, I have decided to leave no will and testament, for the simple reason that always having spent any money I earned the moment I received it and frequently before I received it, I have nothing to leave to anyone beyond a few personal effects. In recognition of your loyal service to me since July 13th, 1946, I should have liked to have bequeathed you a handsome emolument, or at least to have repaid the two hundred and seventy thousand francs I owe you. However, you will doubtless be able to recover this paltry sum from that stingy old bastard, Jacob Friedland." (*He looks up and smiles deprecatingly.*)

JACOB. (*Grimly.*) Continue.

SEBASTIEN. "The whole of my estate will inevitably revert to my loving wife as a just and fitting recompense for the monumental lack of understanding she has lavished on me since we first met on Armistice night

1918 when, owing to an excess of patriotism and inferior Sauterne, she consented to join her life to mine."

COLIN. (*Protectively.*) Mother, I really think—

ISOBEL. Hush, Colin. I would like to hear the rest of the letter.

JACOB. Perhaps it would be advisable, Isobel, for you to return to the hotel with Pamela and Jane. I can deal with this.

ISOBEL. No, Jacob. My husband's insults, even from beyond the grave, are powerless to hurt me.

COLIN. Good for you, mother.

JACOB. Whatever you wish, my dear. (*To SEBASTIEN.*) Go on.

SEBASTIEN. (*Reading.*) "I am well aware that thanks to Mr. Friedland's unscrupulous business acumen, my canvases have achieved a commercial value grossly out of proportion to their merits. In fairness to him, however, I must state that I have reaped considerable financial benefit from his quite remarkable capacity for deceiving the public. My wife and family, also thanks to him, have received over the years a fair percentage of the profits, although I consider this sop to the laws of matrimony unnecessary as my wife has always enjoyed a more than adequate income of her own"—(*looks up*)—there now comes a rather long dissertation on the iniquities of the marriage and divorce laws. It is quite amusing in a bawdy way. Mr. Sorodin had a rich and varied vocabulary as you may remember. Would you like me to read it or skip to the more important part of the letter, the "clou" as we say in France?

JACOB. (*Tersely.*) Skip it and go on.

SEBASTIEN. Very well. (*He reads in a barely distinguishable undertone.*) "—bla bla bla—Canon Law—bla bla bla—self-centred, sanctimonious hypocrites—bla bla bla—bloody impertinence—bla bla bla—bla bla bla—a bunch of predatory fo—bla bla bla—" Ah here we are. "In consideration of the fact that when this letter is ultimately made public I shall be in my grave, I feel it to be only fair that the world of Art, to which I owe so

much, should receive from me one final and unequivocal statement which is, that with the exception of a water colour of an old sheep dog executed at Edinburgh when I was eleven years old, I have never painted a picture of any sort or kind in the whole course of my life."

(ISOBEL gives a slight cry, puts her hand to her throat and chokes.)

CURTAIN

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