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Aurelia

Robert Thomas

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION

**SAMUEL
FRENCH**
FOUNDED 1830

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CHARACTERS

Aurelia

Isabel

Lady Chalmont

Vera, her housekeeper-companion

Mercer

A Visitor

The action of the play takes place in the drawing-room of Lady Chalmont's house on the edge of a Cotswold village

ACT I

Scene 1	An afternoon in March
Scene 2	About noon, four days later
Scene 3	Night, four days later
Scene 4	Morning, several days later

ACT II

Scene 1	Immediately following
Scene 2	Several nights later
Scene 3	One hour later

Time – the present

ACT I

SCENE 1

The drawing-room of Lady Chalmont's house on the edge of a Cotswold village. A dreary late afternoon in March

The old house has been tastefully converted, some interior walls having been removed to make a large main living-room which serves as a gallery for Lady Chalmont's collection of paintings. Doors L and R lead respectively to the kitchen and the dining-room. The open plan of the room reveals the polished wood staircase which leads to the floor above. There are picture windows at the rear looking out to the garden. The furnishings are comfortable, the mixture of odds and ends which spell the history of a cosy middle-class life

When the CURTAIN rises, it is raining. The room is empty. Then a tapping sound is heard and Lady Chalmont starts to descend the staircase. She is about sixty, quietly authoritative. She walks with the aid of a stick, and we suspect she may have suffered a stroke at some time. She calls out as she moves down the stairs

Lady Chalmont Vera! (after a pause, more sharply) Vera!

Vera (off, from the kitchen; impatiently) All right—I'm coming.

As Lady Chalmont reaches the foot of the stairs, Vera emerges from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dishcloth. She is housekeeper-companion to Lady Chalmont, and is fifty years of age

While Lady Chalmont always retains a cool, authoritative air in dealing with Vera, the housekeeper remains stubbornly, cheerfully familiar

Vera Now what?

Lady Chalmont Where's Isabel?

Vera How should I know?

Lady Chalmont It's Wednesday. She always brings me my new books on Wednesday.

Vera Perhaps she's had to work late.

Lady Chalmont It's half-day closing at the library.

Vera Well perhaps they're stock-taking or something. She'll be here. It's not that late. Stop worrying and have a cup of tea.

Lady Chalmont Yes, all right.

Lady Chalmont moves to a comfortable-looking, chintz-covered wing-chair

Vera bustles back to the kitchen. It is a swing door which allows her some effective exits and entrances, which Vera employs as though born to be an actress

Vera (*as she goes*) Of course, you never know—

Lady Chalmont's attention is engaged. She waits with a frown for Vera to return

Vera enters, carrying a ready-set tea-tray

—it could be her boy-friend. Perhaps she's out on a date with him.

Lady Chalmont What boy-friend?

Vera Aha! (*She puts the tray by the wing-chair*)

Lady Chalmont (*impatiently*) Vera, do cut out the melodrama. You give the slightest news such a build-up. I wouldn't mind but it always turns out to be so uninteresting . . .

Vera It's Mr Michaels.

Lady Chalmont The new teacher?

Vera Yes.

Lady Chalmont What about him?

Vera (*knowingly*) She's been seen with him.

Lady Chalmont Well in a place this size, it would be difficult for her not to be seen with him, some time, somewhere. I don't see that that piece of news calls for any—(*she imitates rather well*)—aha's?

The kettle whistles from the kitchen

Vera, offended, puts her nose up in the air and swings back into the kitchen

Lady Chalmont (*calling after Vera*) Now if it had been the Vicar . . .

Vera swings back into the room, transformed, beaming

Vera Funny you should say that . . .

Lady Chalmont (*firmly*) Vera! I do not want to hear that ridiculous story about the Vicar and Mrs Petts.

Vera (*disappointed*) Oh. All right.

Grumpily, Vera swings back through the door into the kitchen

After a pause the kettle whistle ceases. Lady Chalmont arranges the things on the tea-tray

A pause then Vera comes back, carrying a teapot

Vera I know, anyway.

Lady Chalmont What?

Vera Why you're so keen to see Isabel.

Lady Chalmont Oh?

Vera (*stirring the teapot*) I saw the post this morning.

Lady Chalmont (*drily*) Taken to reading my mail now, have you?

Vera Don't need to, do I? Blue stripey airmail envelope. Funny foreign stamps.

Lady Chalmont And you know I've had a letter from my nephew John, in Dakar. It doesn't take Sherlock Holmes.

Lady Chalmont moves to pour the tea. Vera waves her away, pours—for both of them

Vera No. I'd like to have been a detective though—must be very interesting—you know, all that probing they do . . .

Lady Chalmont Yes, I'm sure you'd enjoy it.

Vera (*casually*) Any news then? (*She sits on the sofa*)

Lady Chalmont News?

Vera From John?

Lady Chalmont There is but I hate telling things twice over. So if you could possibly control your curiosity, we'll wait for Isabel.

Vera I don't mind.

Lady Chalmont Good.

Vera She's here now, anyway.

Lady Chalmont Where?

Vera She was coming up the lane while I was in the kitchen just now.

Lady Chalmont (*exasperated*) Well why couldn't you say so? Get her another cup.

Vera (*rising, offended*) I'm going to. Give us a chance.

We see Isabel in the garden, through the glass doors at the back. She smiles and waves to Lady Chalmont. She is twenty-four, charming, shy, very pretty

Lady Chalmont (*waving back*) There she is. Open the door for her.

Vera sighs heavily, moves to the picture windows at the back and slides one side open for Isabel to enter

Isabel Hello, Vera. How are you?

Vera Do this, do that. Make the tea. Open the doors. You need six pairs of hands in this place and feet to go with them . . . (*All this rendered as she closes the door after Isabel, she goes back to collect the teapot*)

Vera sweeps through into the kitchen. She returns immediately with a cup and saucer, before Isabel has had a chance to move down stage and embrace Lady Chalmont

Vera I'm fine thanks. How are you, dear? Seen that nice Mr. Michaels lately? I'll just top up the pot.

Vera disappears back into the kitchen

Isabel smiles, deposits the parcel of books she has brought, kisses Lady Chalmont on the cheek

Isabel Hello, Lady Chalmont. I'm sorry I'm late. Mind I don't make you wet. (*She takes off the rainhat and raincoat she wears*)

Lady Chalmont That's all right, my dear. It's so kind of you to come and see me. In this weather, I can't even get out into the garden. And without my books, in this house, with only Vera—*(she whispers)*—I'd go mad!

Vera returns with the teapot

Vera Whispering again?

Vera pours tea for Isabel and replenishes the other cups

We were getting quite worried about you.

Lady Chalmont Do join us for tea, Vera.

Vera I haven't got a lot of time. But just to hear the news.

Vera and Isabel sit.

Isabel What news?

Lady Chalmont *(quickly)* We hoped you might have something to tell us.

You hear all the gossip in the library.

Isabel Plenty of gossip, yes. But not much real fact. *(She frowns)* People are complaining a lot about these—Hell's Angels or whatever they call themselves.

Lady Chalmont Who are they?

Vera Just a lot of hooligans in black leather jackets.

Isabel And on motor bikes. I ran into them today. That's one of the reasons I'm a bit late.

Lady Chalmont What did they do?

Vera *(excitedly)* Rape? Was it rape? It's best to tell an older woman.

Isabel I'm sorry to disappoint you. No more than childish horseplay, really. They were in the square, and suddenly started riding around me, in a circle—you know like those old American films on TV. It was silly but—frightening. They're children—but big, brutal children.

Lady Chalmont How horrid. I'd have been terrified.

Vera I'd have clumped them.

Isabel I did.

Lady Chalmont Good for you.

Isabel I just stood there, trying to get through, and I couldn't. And I knew I had to break that circle. So—without thinking almost—I just hit out with my string bag, with those rather heavy books in it—and I knocked one off his bike . . .

Lady Chalmont No!

Vera Then what happened?

Isabel Nothing really. I was petrified for a moment, expecting them all to turn on me. But they just rushed to help pick up their mate.

Lady Chalmont Was he hurt?

Isabel No. Not at all. It was the bike they were worried about. Terrified it might have got a scratch.

Vera Kids. Just big ugly kids.

Isabel And while their attention was distracted, I just ran.

Vera *(disappointed)* They didn't follow?

Isabel No. Sorry I can't make it more dramatic.

Vera We haven't had a rape around here for years.

Lady Chalmont I should hope not. Constable Tidmarsh is a very good man.

I must say, wherever one goes, he's always there, on his bicycle—so much more comforting, I feel, than those Panda cars which just whizz past you.

Vera It's about time he sorted out this lot then.

Lady Chalmont He will, I am sure.

Vera He probably has trouble keeping up with them, on that old bike.

Isabel They are a bit of a menace. The chemist's shop in Moreton was broken into last weekend, while they were over there. After drugs, I suppose.

Vera And there's been robberies, three in the last month. They got into Major Buckley's house only the other night.

Lady Chalmont (*anxiously*) What, these same—angels?

Isabel We don't know that.

Vera Who else?

Isabel It might have been anyone. Robberies tend to go in series—a thief just happens to pick on a neighbourhood . . .

Lady Chalmont You are both making me quite nervous. (*She clutches her heart*) Vera, I'd better take one of my pills.

Isabel (*rising*) I'll get them for you . . .

Vera (*rising*) No, I'll get them. I keep them in the kitchen. We need some more water in the pot anyway—(*she moves to the kitchen with the teapot*)—what would anyone want to steal here?

Vera exits to the kitchen

Lady Chalmont My paintings, of course. (*She is quite disturbed at the thought*)

Vera returns, without the teapot, with a bottle of pills

Vera I can't see anything in them myself. (*She dumps down the pill box*) Pills.

Lady Chalmont (*with asperity*) Nevertheless, they are exceedingly valuable. Ask Isabel if you don't believe me.

Isabel Yes they are.

Vera (*observing the paintings critically*) Well I can't imagine anyone wanting to break in and steal them . . .

Lady Chalmont It's all right for you. You don't live in this old house all alone.

Vera (*considering*) It is a bit remote. You could scream out and nobody'd hear you.

Isabel Vera! Stop it.

Lady Chalmont I always find her such a great comfort.

Isabel You'd better take your pill.

Vera I'll get you some tea, to wash it down. (*As she swings through to the kitchen*) Wouldn't give you tuppence for them myself.

Vera exits

Isabel supervises as Lady Chalmont takes her pill

Lady Chalmont That has made up my mind. Who was it who wanted the pictures for an exhibition?

Isabel The Arts Council.

Lady Chalmont Be a darling and write to them for me. Say they can have them. They'll be insured, of course?

Isabel Oh I'm sure they will be. They're responsible for everything.

Lady Chalmont I didn't want to part with them, even for a few months. But now I'll feel much easier. With that gang of cut-throats around.

Vera enters with the teapot

Vera Have I missed anything?

Lady Chalmont (*with a sigh*) No. I don't think so.

Vera You haven't told her yet then? About the letter.

Lady Chalmont Vera, I do wish you would let *me* tell *my* news.

Isabel What letter? (*She is visibly affected*) Not from—John?

Vera Who else?

Lady Chalmont (*crossly*) Vera!

Isabel (*trying to keep her voice very calm*) Is he—coming home?

In an attempt to display calm, Isabel starts to pour more tea for them, but the spout of the pot rattles nervously against the cup. Vera takes the pot from her

Vera Here. Let me. We don't want any breakages.

Lady Chalmont You can talk. A cup and a plate last week. My best Spode.

Vera It couldn't be helped. And I stuck them together again.

Isabel Please—do tell me—what did John have to say?

Lady Chalmont (*gently*) Well—he wants to come here for a short visit—(*with kind firmness*)—with his wife.

Isabel Aurelia?

Vera Funny name, that.

Lady Chalmont (*to Isabel*) Yes.

Vera I've never known anyone called Aurelia before. Nice looking woman though, I must say.

Isabel Did he send any photographs?

Lady Chalmont No. Not this time.

Vera Bit older than him though, I'd imagine. Still, he probably needed someone like that, to put him straight . . .

Isabel has to turn away, to prevent herself sobbing. Lady Chalmont is angry with Vera

Lady Chalmont Vera! No-one asked you to drag up the past.

Vera Oh come on. If he's coming back here, it's going to be dragged up anyway. And what did I say to upset her?

Lady Chalmont You know Isabel's feelings. I'm really angry with you, Vera . . .

Isabel (*turning back to them*) No, please—Lady Chalmont, don't be cross with Vera—she's right, she didn't say anything . . .

Vera There you are.

Isabel (*trying to smile*) There was never anything between us, anyway. It was just—well—we were friends from childhood. He was my first—not so much, boy-friend, as hero. I loved him, I admit, but in a very childish sort of way. I admired him so much, he really was a hero to me. That's why it was all so awful when . . . (*She cannot go on. She relapses into silence, looks down at her hands*)

Lady Chalmont (*gently*) I know, my dear.

Vera (*helpfully*) Nice boy, but weak. I mean, I saw it coming . . .

Lady Chalmont Then you might have told me.

Vera How could I? Like a son to you, wasn't he! Apple of your eye. You'd never have believed me. But I knew he was in trouble, gambling and so on. Everyone knew, except you . . .

Lady Chalmont Well I found out, didn't I? When he tried to rob me. And so now that you have succeeded in digging up an unpleasant memory, perhaps you'd be kind enough to leave me to have a talk with Isabel alone.

Vera All right. If you want to be like that. (*Rising in high dudgeon*) I don't have to stay here, you know. Mrs Dolby has offered me twice as much to look after her. I just happen to be loyal, that's all. I mean, twenty years may not be much to you, but to me, it means something. But if you want to treat me like a servant, all right. I don't mind drinking my tea in the kitchen on my own. I don't mind at all.

Vera sweeps out, with her cup of tea

Isabel (*looking after Vera, biting her lip*) Oh dear, I . . .

Lady Chalmont Don't worry about it. I get this at least once a week.

Isabel But if she walks out on you . . .

Lady Chalmont She won't. No further than the kitchen. (*In a whisper*) She can hear from there.

Isabel I'm sorry. It was me being stupid that started all this . . .

Lady Chalmont Now forget it. No-one has been silly. Or perhaps we all have. Vera's quite right, of course. She usually is. We can't try and forget the past—and certainly not when it comes back to visit us.

Isabel (*eagerly*) Do let them come here, Lady Chalmont. Please try and forgive him. I know he didn't mean it.

Lady Chalmont I'm not so sure. And I don't know I can. It's not in my nature to be forgiving. That may make me mean and miserable, but that's how it is. I loved that boy, and tried to give him everything. When he became an orphan, I took the place of his parents. If he was in trouble, he could have come to me.

Isabel But he couldn't—because he loved you—he didn't want to hurt you, by knowing—he knew how you idolized him . . .

Lady Chalmont (*drily*) So he robbed me instead. Very thoughtful.

Isabel It sounds grotesque, I know. But if you hadn't caught him rifling

your desk that night—you would have thought it was a burglar—you were insured . . .

Lady Chalmont And we would have all lived happy ever after. Come on, Isabel, you're grown up now. If he had got away with that, who knows what would have come next. In a way, it was probably a good thing I did catch him red-handed. At least it was me and not the police.

Isabel (*sadly*) Yes—I suppose . . .

Lady Chalmont (*gently*) Even if it did mean him going away. He had to learn to stand on his own two feet, Isabel. There was the plantation his father had left him. Not much, but it was his own. I paid his fare out to Africa and then—well it was up to him. And if you can believe what he writes, he's grateful to me.

Isabel (*quickly*) I'm sure he is.

Lady Chalmont Forgive me for being sceptical. He implies he has been successful. Obviously, he's made enough money for him and his wife to come over here. Whether it's for a holiday or not, is not very clear. I just hope it's not to try and borrow more money.

Isabel I'm sure it's not. Oh, I do wish you'd think more kindly of him. He probably wants to make amends. And he wants to see you again. And don't tell me you don't want to see him—I just shan't believe you . . .

Lady Chalmont (*with a shrug*) I'm curious, of course . . .

Isabel Of course you are. And you must be dying to see Aurelia.

Lady Chalmont (*after a pause*) Yes. I suppose I am. Vera's right, it is a strange name. But, funny, you know it gives me a sort of shiver when I hear it. I wonder why.

Isabel Because she's John's wife, your niece, your daughter almost.

Lady Chalmont You are a funny child.

Isabel What have I said?

Lady Chalmont Nothing. But you are far more a daughter to me than Aurelia will ever be, I suspect. But we'll see.

Isabel You'll let them come then? What are their plans?

Lady Chalmont I'll give you the letter to read. They're flying to London next week, on business, and they'll telephone from there.

Isabel Next week? So soon?

Lady Chalmont Yes, well—it's these aeroplanes—they're frightfully fast.

(*She rises from her chair*) You are so good, Isabel—you don't hate Aurelia at all, do you? (*She moves to the desk*)

Isabel No, of course not. Why should I?—I was so worried about John when he went out there—when he wrote and told us he was getting married, I was happy for him—it meant that he'd settled down, found himself—and she looks so beautiful in her photographs . . .

Lady Chalmont (*with a grunt*) You know what they say about beauty.

(*She rummages in her bag*) Here—here's the letter—it's here somewhere.

(*She finds a letter and hands it over*) I'm glad we had the chance of a little chat. To tell you the truth, I was more worried about its effect on you, than anything. I wouldn't have wanted you to stay away from here . . .

Isabel I wouldn't . . .

Lady Chalmont You did.

Isabel I did then, yes. I couldn't bear the thought of him not being here . . .

Lady Chalmont And you hated me.

Isabel (*after a pause*) Yes, for a time, I think I did. I couldn't see any wrong in John, ever. But—(*she forces a smile*)—it was a long time ago, wasn't it? I suppose I've grown up now. I can see things more clearly, other people's points of view.

Lady Chalmont nods, starts to move with the aid of her stick towards the kitchen

Lady Chalmont I'll leave you with the letter . . . while I go and make my peace with Vera. (*Loudly*) I do hope she'll forgive me. (*In her normal voice*) We play this scene once a week too.

Lady Chalmont smiles and hobbles into the kitchen. We hear her greet Vera and then the soft hubble-bubble of their voices off

The Lights dim slowly as Isabel reads the letter, with intensity. We see, in spite of the persuasiveness of her last speech, that she still feels a strong passion towards John. As the Lights dim to a single spot on her, Isabel holds the letter to her breast as though embracing it. She speaks, very softly, almost without voice, his name

Isabel John.

The Lights fade to a Black-out

SCENE 2

The same. About noon, four days later

The sun is shining brightly outside and the garden looks charming through the picture window. The glass door is open. In the centre of the room there is a small pile of good-quality travelling cases

As the CURTAIN rises, Vera bustles in from the kitchen. She wears an apron and carries a vase of flowers. From above, two voices are heard, indistinctly, from the first floor. One of them is Lady Chalmont's. The other, as we will soon learn, is that of Aurelia

Vera (*grumbling to herself*) That's right. Put the flowers in water. Fetch up the cases. What is this, a hotel? They'll be leaving their boots outside their bedroom doors next. (*She continues grumbling all the time as she sets down the flowers, picks up two of the suitcases, drags them up the stairs, imitating different voices*) Call the maid, dear. What's her name? Vera? Hello, room service? Yes, Vera here. I say, your lawn looks in good shape, what's the name of your gardener? Vera? Really?

Vera exits upstairs. A moment for pause, then Isabel appears in the garden.

She halts at the threshold immediately struck by the suitcases there. Lady Chalmont starts to descend the staircase, talking over her shoulder

Lady Chalmont But Vera, I did ask you to put the soap in the bathroom. (Patiently, at a blurred and indistinct reply) No. I didn't tell you, I asked you . . . (She continues down as Isabel comes into the room, and sees her) Isabel . . . my darling . . .

Isabel (with a nod at the suitcases; excitedly) They're here then?

Lady Chalmont Well yes and no. They are not here, but she is. (She reaches the foot of the stairs and puts a consoling hand on Isabel's shoulder) John was held up at the last moment. But he is coming.

Isabel (bitterly disappointed) Oh—I see . . .

There is a momentarily awkward silence broken by Vera coming down the stairs, still grumbling

Vera Put the soap in the bathroom, Vera, pop down to the village, Vera, I tell you I'm cook, housemaid, parlourmaid, kitchenmaid, butler and chauffeur. They say you can't get domestic staff these days, they're joking, ask Lady Chalmont, she's cracked it, she's got the whole lot rolled into one, until a certain someone goes across to Mrs Dolby for treble the money, anyway . . .

Vera exits into the kitchen. At the same moment Aurelia appears at the top of the stairs. She is in her thirties, beautiful with a compelling, almost hypnotic, personality. She wears a stunning costume. An elegant, feminine, mysterious lady

Aurelia Vera darling, would you fetch my white week-end case for me . . . (She cuts off as she sees Isabel) Oh.

Lady Chalmont Aurelia, my dear, let me introduce . . .

Aurelia cuts her off with a wave of the hand, as she descends

Aurelia No—there's no need. It's Isabel.

Aurelia, at the foot of the stairs, smiles sweetly and extends her hand

Isabel (shyly) Yes. (She moves to shake hands)

Aurelia (warmly) John told me so much about you. I know what good friends you were.

Lady Chalmont Isabel is an angel. I don't know what I'd do without her.

Vera carrying a bar of soap, enters from the kitchen, on the move towards the stairs

Vera I don't know what you'd do without me, but you'll find out before long, I'm telling you. (As she passes Isabel) Are you staying for lunch? (Before Isabel can answer) You might as well, I've prepared for four. (She starts to climb the stairs)

Lady Chalmont (*appealingly*) Vera . . .

Vera Yes, all right. I'm doing all I can, quick as I know how. (*She brandishes the soap*) Soap, soap, you said, remember?

Vera disappears at the top of the stairs

Lady Chalmont looks annoyed. Isabel controls a smile. Aurelia spots it and they smile together. It is a first moment of intimacy between them. Lady Chalmont limps towards her chair

Lady Chalmont I don't suppose you have staff problems in Africa.

Aurelia (*smiling sympathetically*) We do—but they're rather different ones . . .

Isabel You'll find Vera awfully sweet, really. She just takes a bit of getting used to.

Lady Chalmont That's an understatement. I can't get used to her after twenty years.

Isabel What was it you were asking for Aurelia, when you came down? The white case? Let me take it up for you.

Aurelia stops her with a smile as Isabel moves towards the case

Aurelia No, it's all right. I only wanted it for your presents. I can give them to you here. (*She takes up the white case and opens it*) They're from John.

(She hands a package to Lady Chalmont)

Lady Chalmont (*feeling the rather bulky package curiously*) I wonder what it is.

Aurelia And there's one for you. (*She hands a package to Isabel*)

Isabel For me? From John?

Aurelia (*without any edge*) From both of us.

Isabel Thank you.

Isabel starts to open her smaller package while Lady Chalmont still tries to figure out what is inside her own parcel

Lady Chalmont What on earth is it?

Isabel gasps with pleasure as she opens the package and takes out of the box inside a necklace of coloured stones

Isabel Oh, it's lovely.

Aurelia They're moonstones. They're supposed to bring good luck.

Lady Chalmont Well—let's see what I've got. (*She starts to peel off the wrappers*)

Isabel moves to a mirror on one of the side walls, holds the necklace up to her throat so that she can see the effect. Aurelia smiles, moves with her

Aurelia It looks lovely on you. Here, let me fix it . . .

Isabel smiles thanks at her. Plainly, a relationship has been struck up quickly between the two women

Aurelia There—now that is really beautiful.

Lady Chalmont (*almost at the end of her task, glancing across*) Lovely . . .

(*As she finishes unwrapping*) Oh, how hideous!

Lady Chalmont is appalled at the ghastly looking African mask which is her present. Isabel, seeing it, controls a giggle. Again there is an exchange of intimate glances between her and Aurelia, as Aurelia asks, with straight-faced sincerity:

Aurelia Don't you like it?

Lady Chalmont (*trying to be polite*) Er—yes—when I say it is hideous, I mean, er, the whole point of this type of mask was just that, to be hideous, frighten off vengeful gods and so on . . .

Aurelia and Isabel continue to conceal their amusement at her discomfiture

Vera starts to descend the staircase, muttering to herself

Vera Soap's in the bathroom, I've put out the clean towels, changed all the sheets, Hoovered the edges . . .

Lady Chalmont (*simultaneously*) Good, lets all have a glass of sherry then . . .

Vera (*without looking at them, as she crosses to the kitchen*) Pour the sherry, Vera, put out some crisps . . .

Lady Chalmont (*crossly*) Vera!

Vera stops, turns, is terribly formal

Vera Yes, my lady?

Lady Chalmont I was going to ask you if you would join us in a glass of sherry? I'm sure Isabel won't mind pouring for us.

Isabel No, of course not.

Vera (*thawing immediately*) Oh, well . . .

Isabel But do let me show you my present first—from John and Aurelia—isn't it lovely?

Vera comes over to join the group, standing near Lady Chalmont's chair

Vera Yes—very nice . . .

Lady Chalmont And what about mine? (*She turns in her chair to Vera, suddenly holding up the mask to her face*) Eh?

Vera Aaaaah! (*She clutches at her breast as the others all laugh*) God—you scared the daylights out of me—how'd you like to meet that in the dark?

Lady Chalmont It would give me a heart attack, I'm sure.

Isabel moves away to pour the drinks

Vera And that reminds me. Only one sherry for you. You know what the doctor said.

Lady Chalmont Vera, don't nag. I'm a strong old bird really. And I lead a quiet life. We don't get a lot of excitement, do we?

Isabel hands round the drinks on a tray

Vera Excitement? No, never. (*She sips at her drink, considers*) Unless you believe what they say about the Vicar.

Lady Chalmont Well I don't. The village makes up these stories because it's so bored.

Aurelia Is it really just a village here, then?

Vera There's not much to do. The big event of the year is the pantomime at the Church Hall.

Isabel You'll find it all very different.

Aurelia Not really. Ours is a big country. But a small community.

Lady Chalmont But do you like it?

Aurelia I was born there. It's my home.

Lady Chalmont And John?

Aurelia (*with a shrug*) He has done well, made a success of the plantation. But I think his heart is in England.

Vera (*pouring herself another drink*) There'll always be an England.

Lady Chalmont Vera, mind how you go with that sherry. Remember what happened when you cooked the Christmas pudding.

Vera (*defensively*) I was only tasting the ingredients. And sherry and brandy don't mix, not in my stomach anyway. And I do have a bit of a light head for drink, I must confess. Not like John. (*She laughs heartily*) He could really knock it back.

Vera continues laughing until she suddenly realizes she is the only one

Lady Chalmont (*quietly*) I thought we weren't going back over the past history?

Vera Now what have I said?

Aurelia (*quickly*) Out there, everyone drinks. It is a social crime not to. (*A tiny pause*) John drinks no more than anyone else—and no less.

Vera Got held up on business, did he?

Aurelia Yes. A neighbour is selling his estate. And that's a rather complicated business these days. John stayed to help. It should only take a few days.

Isabel What's it like, your life there?

Aurelia Oh—a bit boring. John's away all day. There's not a lot for me to do.

Lady Chalmont But doesn't he work on the plantation, where you live?

Aurelia Oh yes, but it is awfully big. I don't see him until the evening.

Lady Chalmont You have friends you can visit?

Aurelia Yes. But everything is so distant there. One might drive two hundred miles just to go to a party. And in the rainy season, we are just stuck, literally. The whole place becomes a bog.

Vera We get quite a lot of rain here.

Aurelia (*smiling*) Believe me, you have never seen rain. I sometimes feel I am living in an aquarium. In one day, we would get your rainfall for a year.

Vera Of course we get snow, too. You don't.

Aurelia (*exchanging a quick smiling glance with Isabel*) No, I must say, snow has never been a problem. (*With sudden enthusiasm*) But you know what you have here? Culture. Theatres, museums, the opera, the ballet. This is what I'd like to see while I'm here.

Lady Chalmont You must get some time off, Isabel. Show Aurelia around.

Aurelia I'd like that. But you'll join us, Aunt Margaret, won't you?

Lady Chalmont I'd like to. I'd love to get to London. Or even Oxford. But it's no use. My leg is too painful. And Doctor Redford doesn't like me travelling far.

Aurelia Then we'll go and see everything for you, tell you all about it. Will you really be able to get time off, Isabel?

Isabel Yes, I think so. We have a system of time-saving at the library. I've got the best part of a week due to me, and that's without the holidays.

Lady Chalmont There you are then, that's settled.

Aurelia I'll hire a car. That way, I'll see the countryside.

Lady Chalmont Good idea.

Aurelia We'll have great fun, I know we will.

Vera (*a little drunk on her two sherries*) It'll give the village something to talk about.

Lady Chalmont (*crossly*) What on earth has it got to do with the village?

Vera Well—they know how Isabel felt about John—they're expecting her and Aurelia to be at daggers drawn.

Isabel (*with uncharacteristic coldness*) It just goes to show how wrong the village can be, doesn't it?

Lady Chalmont Or those half a dozen gossiping biddies that Vera likes to think makes up the village.

Aurelia Yes—please tell them, Vera, from me, that we are good friends. Very good friends.

Vera suddenly realizes that everyone is against her and goes on the defensive

Vera Well don't look at me. I never indulge in gossip myself. But you can't help overhearing . . . and I'm just telling you what people will say.

The telephone rings

Vera I'll get it . . . (*She takes a pace or two, staggers slightly, holds on to a table*)

Lady Chalmont Let Isabel go.

Isabel moves to the desk

Vera What for?

Lady Chalmont Because she can walk in a straight line. It's quicker.

Aurelia takes a cigarette and lighter from the sofa table. Vera remains holding on to her table

Isabel Hello? (*She answers the phone*) Yes? Oh, just a moment please. (*She cups the phone, nods to Aurelia*) It's for you.

Aurelia, about to light her cigarette, drops it, taken aback

Aurelia For me? But no-one knows I'm here.

Lady Chalmont Perhaps it's John? (*She looks at Isabel*)

Isabel No. I know John's voice. And anyway, it's a call box. (*She gestures silence to the others. Into the phone*) Who is it calling please? Just a moment. (*She cups the phone again*) A Mr Mercer. (*As Aurelia hesitates*) Do you want me to say you're out?

Aurelia (*moving to the phone*) No. It doesn't matter. (*She forces a smile for Isabel as she takes the phone from her*) Hello? . . . Yes, that's right. I'm fine, how are you? (*She listens*) No, John is still out there. I'm waiting to hear definitely when he is coming. (*She listens, hesitates*) No, I—well thank you for the invitation but I really am rather tied up—yes, my aunt, and I have a friend here. I really wouldn't be able to manage it. (*She controls, not too successfully, a fairly obvious unease*) Yes, perhaps when John arrives . . . Yes, do call again . . . no, I'm sorry . . . all right, good-bye . . . (*She puts down the phone, shrugs, forces a smile*) It's a character who was on the same plane coming over here. He's got an important agency out there. I don't like him very much—but he goes to the same club as John—and out there, that makes him some kind of blood-brother . . .

Lady Chalmont Yes—I know the type. Vera, I hope you don't mind my mentioning the subject, but you haven't forgotten lunch, have you?

Vera is still at the table where she halted en route for the phone

Vera (*with a gasp*) The duck!

During the following, Isabel looks at Aurelia, concerned at her unease during the telephone conversation

Lady Chalmont Yes.

Vera It's in the oven.

Lady Chalmont Exactly my point.

Vera I must go.

Lady Chalmont I think you should.

Vera pursues a reasonably straight line towards the kitchen

Vera (*excitedly, as she exits*) I never should be forced to drink sherry.

Vera exits to the kitchen, swinging through the door

Lady Chalmont (*shaking her head*) There—you've well and truly met our treasure Vera.

Aurelia I think she is very amusing. (*She is aware that Isabel is looking at her*) Now—what was it we were talking about? Oh, yes, our trip to London. Do you know, there are three cities I have always longed to visit. Paris, which I saw when the plane landed there yesterday. London, which you are going to take me to see, I hope. And New York, which maybe I will see some time.

Vera comes out of the kitchen and marches towards the centre of the room

Vera Everything's all right, all in order, lunch will be in twenty minutes. (*She starts back towards the kitchen*)

The front doorbell rings

O.K., I'll get it.

Lady Chalmont Isabel, is she fit to answer the front door?

Vera exits through the kitchen

Isabel It's too late to stop her.

The sound of Vera's voice, the door closing, then she comes marching back into the room

Vera Overseas telegram.

Lady Chalmont For me?

Vera No. *(She hands the telegram form to Aurelia, starts back)* Don't forget, twenty minutes.

Vera exits

Isabel *(as Aurelia opens the telegram)* Is it from John?

Aurelia I expect so. *(She reads)* Yes. Damn. *(To Lady Chalmont)* Sorry. *(She reads)* "Apologize delay may be ten days will cable again love to all John."

Lady Chalmont Oh dear. *(Consolingly)* Well—it'll give you some time to see England. *(To Isabel)* You might as well claim that week off, my dear. Pour Aurelia another drink. And have one yourself.

Isabel *(moving to the drinks tray)* Won't you?

Lady Chalmont No. Better not. It really does affect me. Even that one. In fact, I think I'd better lie down till lunch, just in case.

Aurelia *(moving to Lady Chalmont)* Aunt Margaret, you should have said if you didn't feel well.

Lady Chalmont I'm fine, really. Just being cautious.

Isabel Let me help you up to your room.

Lady Chalmont Thank you.

The telephone rings

Don't let Vera answer it.

Isabel *(moving to the phone)* All right.

Aurelia I'll see Lady Chalmont upstairs.

Aurelia assists Lady Chalmont up the stairs as Isabel answers the phone

Isabel *(on the phone)* Hello? . . . Yes. All right, I'll take it down. Who is it for? . . . Yes . . . *(She scribbles on a pad)* Yes, I've got that . . . *(She listens, writes)* Yes. Is that all? . . . Well thank you for telephoning but we have already received that telegram. Yes—*(quickly)*—just a minute . . . *(She glances upstairs)*

Aurelia and Lady Chalmont have disappeared from view

Did you say that was sent from Paris? . . . Yesterday? . . . Are you sure? . . . *(A pause)* No, nothing's wrong. Perfectly all right. Just a mix-up. . . Yes, we have received the telegram. Thank you.

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