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THE ASPERN PAPERS

A Comedy of Letters

Adapted for the theatre
by
MICHAEL REDGRAVE

from the story
by
HENRY JAMES

To
FLORA ROBSON & BEATRIX LEHMAN

SAMUEL



FRENCH

LONDON

NEW YORK TORONTO SYDNEY HOLLYWOOD

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THE ASPERN PAPERS

First produced by Peter Daubney in association with Michael Redgrave Productions Ltd and F.E.S. Plays Ltd at the Theatre Royal, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, on the 27th July, 1959, and subsequently at the Queen's Theatre, London, on the 12th August, 1959, with the following cast of characters:

(in the order of their appearance)

ASSUNTA, the maid	<i>Nancy Nevinson</i>
MRS PREST, H.J.'s friend	<i>Pauline Jameson</i>
HENRY JARVIS (H.J.), a Man of Letters	<i>Michael Redgrave</i>
MISS TINA, Miss Bordereau's niece	<i>Flora Robson</i>
MISS JULIANA BORDEREAU	<i>Beatrix Lehmann</i>
PASQUALE, H.J.'s manservant	<i>Olaf Pooley</i>

Directed by MICHAEL REDGRAVE

Setting by PAUL MAYO

Music for the song *The Green Hussars*
composed by JAMES BERNARD

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the Play passes in the "sala" of Miss Bordereau's house in Venice

ACT I

An afternoon in the Spring of the year 1895

ACT II

SCENE 1 Six weeks later. Afternoon

SCENE 2 Three weeks later. Early evening

SCENE 3 Later that evening

ACT III

Twelve days later. Afternoon

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(See also page ii)

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THE ASPERN PAPERS

ACT I

SCENE—*The “sala” of Miss Bordereau’s house in Venice. An afternoon in the Spring of the year 1895.*

The room is on the first floor, some twenty feet above the canal and garden, and gives the feeling of a grand but uncomfortable waiting-room that has seen better days. We see five walls of what must be an octagonal room. The downstage wall R contains a door. It is never used, and at the moment there are three small chairs in front of it, one of the chairs being stacked upside down on one of the others. The next wall R, angled towards the wall back C, has a large arch. Two steps lead up to a landing which connects the stairs from below, at the downstage side of the landing and out of sight, with the stairs at the upstage side of the landing which lead to the upper floors. On this landing there is a small window, barred on the outer side, which allows a look on visitors arriving at the front door, which opens on to the canal, some twenty feet below. A smaller window is in the upstage staircase wall. On the landing there is a console table and by the window a strange lever and chain which can release the bolts on the front door below. The third wall of the octagonal room faces us, and this wall contains the main feature of the room: a pair of high, heavy doors which open outwards into other rooms: Miss Bordereau’s parlour and bedroom. When these doors are open we see another pair of doors, padded with faded leather or torn baize. When this second pair is opened we see what may suggest a large room: a gilt screen and a gilt-top table. These two pairs of doors are contained in a sort of porch or alcove, surmounted by an escutcheon in painted stone or plaster, heavily cobwebbed. On each side of the porch are console tables, the one L broken away from the wall and standing upside down. The fourth wall, up L, contains a bay which matches the landing in the second wall. Shuttered french windows lead on to a balcony smothered with evergreen magnolia. From this balcony, an iron stairway, out of sight at the downstage end, descends to the garden. The fifth wall, down L, contains a similar doorway to the first wall down R, but it is purely decorative, there is no door. A large iron stove, of a gothic type, stands in front of the doorway and its metal flue or chimney pierces the wall inside the doorway. The heat and smoke from the chimney have cracked and stained the plaster of the wall. A heavy, circular table stands LC, with small chairs above and L of it. (See note on p. 75.)

When the CURTAIN rises, the room is empty. Two nearby church bells, overlapping, chime the half hour. ASSUNTA, the servant, comes up the stairs from below on to the landing. She is large and heavy, probably no

more than forty, but she looks more. She wears clacking pattens and a black shawl. Her throat is bound up with rags. When she speaks it is in a hoarse whisper. She carries a brass tray with a plate, and a bowl covered with muslin. She goes to the double doors up C and opens the right-hand door. As she does so, the front door bell rings. ASSUNTA puts the tray on the table R of the double doors, goes to the landing window, opens it and looks out, then returns to the double doors. She carefully makes the inner double doors fast. This must be made quite clear. She is obviously very anxious not to allow a disturbance. She closes the door up C, crosses to the open landing window and peers out.

ASSUNTA (calling in a hoarse voice) Chi é?

MRS PREST (off) Buona sera, Assunta. I'm Mrs Prest. Do you remember me?

(ASSUNTA, after a moment's consideration, pulls the lever which releases the front door. We hear the lock open and the creak of the front door.

ASSUNTA exits down the stairs R to meet the visitors, her pattens clacking on the stone steps)

(Off; her voice growing louder as she comes up the stairs) You remember, Assunta? I was here some years ago.

(MRS PREST appears on the landing. She is a strikingly handsome American in her forties, very fashionably dressed. She speaks with a pronounced and charming American accent. She carries a parasol and her handbag.

ASSUNTA follows her on)

How are your dear ladies? Well, I hope?

(ASSUNTA moves up C)

(She comes into the room) I've brought along an old friend of mine who is very anxious to meet them.

(ASSUNTA clutches the rags around her throat)

(She calls) H.J., my dear friend. Come along up.

(H.J. is heard coming up the steps R)

(She notices Assunta clutching her throat and goes to her) My dear child! Not the "Venetian throat"? Spring in Venice can be so treacherous. (She lowers her voice sympathetically) I am sorry. Did they get my letter?

(ASSUNTA looks puzzled)

(She speaks with some asperity. Indeed, for all her social charm to Assunta, she is plainly not quite at ease) My gondolier brought it. The day before yesterday.

(ASSUNTA nods vigorously.

HENRY JARVIS, known as "H.J.", appears on the landing. He

is also an American but he is so Europeanized and so much the Anglo-ophile that he imagines that people do not guess his New England upbringing. Very few do. He is not handsome, but undeniably impressive. A certain pomposity makes him at some moments seem to be more than his age, which is forty-five, but his general appearance is younger than that and there are moments, when he is disappointed or hurt, at which he becomes disarmingly child-like. He has considerable physical and intellectual vitality. His movements as well as his speech are emphatic and thrusting. He can roll off long sentences sonorously and rapidly, without drawing breath. It is his favourite form of exercise. He carries his top hat, stick and gloves and is holding a visiting-card)

(She turns to H.J.) They got the note, Harry. (She crosses to c, removing her gloves, and turns to look at H.J.)

(H.J., on the landing, extends the visiting-card vaguely, as if in a dream, in the direction of ASSUNTA, who makes a slight move to take it, but his attention is absorbed by the room in which he finds himself and unthinkingly he puts the card into his waistcoat pocket)

H.J. What a strange—what an extraordinary room! (He puts his hat, stick and gloves on the table R of the double doors)

MRS PREST (covering up; with unnatural brightness) I don't see anything so very extraordinary about it, it's a very nice sala. Or was in its day.

H.J. (moving down R) Extraordinary. For once, a place is exactly as I imagined it. Except that it is empty.

MRS PREST (moving to L of H.J.) What did you expect? The two old ladies live alone.

(H.J. takes out a large silk handkerchief and mops his brow)

Are you sure you're quite well, Harry?

(H.J. seems to come out of his trance, and, ignoring Mrs Prest's remark, addresses Assunta)

H.J. (to Assunta) Are the ladies at home?

(ASSUNTA looks at Mrs Prest)

MRS PREST (as she sweeps round up L) Le sognora sono a casa?

(ASSUNTA smiles doubtfully)

Please ask them if I might see them for a few minutes. (She takes a visiting-card from her handbag, moves and hands it to Assunta) I said in my note that I would call this afternoon.

(ASSUNTA nods)

Grazie.

ASSUNTA. Prego.

(ASSUNTA exits up C, carefully closing the door behind her. MRS

PREST turns swiftly on H.J. *The ensuing conversation is conducted almost in whispers, very urgently*)

MRS PREST. H.J.! *(She moves to L of him)* Sometimes you would try the patience of a saint. Now, quickly, explain what this is all about.

H.J. There is no time. *(He crosses to the stove and closes its door)* I would have told you in the gondola on our way from the station if you had met me alone. Why did you bring that foolish Contessa and her friend? *(He starts to prowling around the room)*

MRS PREST. If your train had not been late, and if the dear, kind Contessa had not offered me a lift in her gondola, I might have missed you.

(H.J. moves to the windows up L and looks out)

But why, in heaven's name, did you insist on dragging us all in straight here?

(H.J. crosses to the doors up C)

You did not even so much as say "Thank you" to the Contessa. It was not gracious.

(H.J. listens at the doors up C)

Now, tell me, quickly please, what are you up to?

(H.J. moves hurriedly up R, and motions Mrs Prest to be silent.)

ASSUNTA enters up C and crosses to L of Mrs Prest)

ASSUNTA *(shaking her head)* No. Sleeping.

MRS PREST. Sleeping! What, both of them?

ASSUNTA *(in a hoarse whisper; partly in Italian and partly in English)* No, la vecchia, Signorina Bordereau, is sleeping. L'altra, Miss Tina, in chiesa, at the church.

MRS PREST. I hope we haven't disturbed the old lady.

ASSUNTA. She never hear nothing from her room.

(H.J. and MRS PREST look at each other)

H.J. I will meet you at your hotel, Helen, a little later. You go back now with your friends. I would like to wait a few minutes.

MRS PREST. You can't imagine that the Contessa has been waiting. She said she would send her gondola back for us.

H.J. I don't know what has come over me. I seem to have been exceptionally uncouth this afternoon. *(He picks up his hat, stick and gloves)* Let me walk you back.

MRS PREST. Nothing would persuade me to try to find our way through the back streets of Venice, even at this hour. *(She turns to Assunta)* Assunta, let me know as soon as the gondola returns, will you?

(ASSUNTA *nods, crosses above Mrs Prest and exits down the steps R.*
H.J. *moves to the landing and watches Assunta go downstairs*)

I would like to sit down, Harry. I am a little fatigued.

H.J. Oh, I'm sorry. (*He takes the top stacked chair R and places it RC*)

(MRS PREST *sits on the chair RC*)

(*He takes her hand and lightly kisses it*) Forgive me, Helen.

(MRS PREST *gives him a kind but sad smile, and leans her parasol against the back of the chair*)

MRS PREST (*cheerfully*) I don't suppose it will be long.

(H.J. *takes another chair from R and places it down R of Mrs Prest*)

How was London? Oh, by the way, did you see the Scarabellis?

(H.J., *at the mention of the name, looks swiftly at Mrs Prest and paces a few steps down R in agitation*)

H.J. (*pulling himself together*) Yes, I saw the Scarabellis. (*He crosses to the table LC and puts down his hat, stick and gloves*) It is they who, after you, are responsible for this sudden, impetuous excursion.

MRS PREST. How am I responsible?

H.J. (*moving c*) At the Embassy the other evening, Scarabelli was talking of you to the American Consul. He said, jokingly of course, that you would make the best wife for an ambassador that anyone could wish.

MRS PREST. Why jokingly? And why, especially, "for an ambassador"?

H.J. Please, Helen, I beg you, do not banter with me. (*He moves up LC*) I feel I am on the verge—the perilous but perhaps redeeming verge—of the most important discovery of my life.

MRS PREST (*quietly*) Go on.

H.J. (*moving to L of her*) You know my ruling passion?

MRS PREST. I think so. Though you and I might not agree as to its nature.

H.J. Jeffrey Aspern.

MRS PREST. Ah, yes. The early American poet. You were at one time engaged on writing something about him, were you not?

H.J. (*a little stiffly*) I am editing the centenary edition of his works, which will include a full-length biography. Joseph Cumnor is to publish it two years from now.

MRS PREST. Full-length? But you once told me very little is known about Aspern.

H.J. (*crossing above Mrs Prest to R*) Until recently, all too little. Since then, far more. Now, with your help . . .

MRS PREST. How do I come into it?

(H.J. sits on the chair down R of Mrs Prest, and pulls it slightly towards her)

H.J. At the Embassy the other night, Scarabelli, among your many graces and virtues, listed your kindnesses. He mentioned several names. Names of people to whom you had been a benefactress, whom you have helped out of your big, bounteous heart.

MRS PREST. Ah! You mean the Bordereau ladies.

(H.J. nods gravely)

Yes—let me see. I can't remember how I first heard of them. The name sounds French, of course, but I remembered I had once known a family called Bordereau who came from New Orleans. I heard that the old lady here was ill and I had a suspicion they were in want; so I came here to see if there was anything I could do.

H.J. Did you get to know them at all?

MRS PREST (*shaking her head*) I visited here only once or twice. Even then I saw only the younger one. The old lady, I understand, has been a complete recluse for as long as anyone can remember. She must be very old. In her youth, it seems, she was something of a wit and more than something of a beauty. Quite the toast of the town, in fact. The younger is—well—dim. But not, believe me, without a certain still pride. She made it quite clear, without saying so, that they asked no favours and desired no attention. I did not feel encouraged to call again.

H.J. How long have they lived in Venice?

MRS PREST. They may have been born here for all I know.

H.J. Have they any money?

MRS PREST. Well, as you see, not enough to throw it about. From the outside, this palazzo looks as if, at any moment, it might crumble quietly into the canal.

H.J. (*rising and crossing above Mrs Prest to the doors up C; in horror*) Ah, don't! Even at this moment she may have passed away quietly in her sleep and the key to the riddle of Jeffrey Aspern lost for ever. (*He begins to pace the room*)

MRS PREST. Riddle?

H.J. (*moving down C*) The secret, if you prefer the word, of what caused the sudden, dramatic change in the quality of his writing. (*He moves up C and turns*) It has baffled literary biographers for over half a century. Now, I believe I am on the threshold of discovery.

MRS PREST. Don't be so tantalizing, Harry. Explain yourself.

H.J. (*crossing to LC and turning*) Aspern's later poems are of such quivering intensity and passion, so far above his early lyrics and "native woodnotes wild" that some critics in their blind ignorance have dared to suggest that they came from another heart, another pen.

MRS PREST. But what has all this to do with these two ladies?

H.J. It is the older one I must meet.

MRS PREST. I thought Aspern died young. You're not suggesting that he knew her? (*She pauses*) She must have been a mere infant if he did.

H.J. She was a young woman. We may hesitantly assume that she was not more than twenty and not less than seventeen in the year when their stars crossed.

MRS PREST. You mean they were lovers?

H.J. When some planetary intervention parted them or when—not to put too fine a point on it—when he deserted her, he had three years gloriously to live, before he was heroically to die, defending his adopted country, shot through the heart by the invader's bullet.

MRS PREST. When did you discover all this?

H.J. (*pacing freely up and down c*) Five months ago, at a sale of an old house in Philadelphia, an extraordinary cache of documents was discovered that had been in the possession of a cousin of Aspern's. A few business letters, a brief note scribbled from the field of battle and a package of a more personal nature, to wit, a diary; extremely revealing as to character. And what was so odd is, that although the war was long since over, the diary had been heavily censored. The package containing it was not in the poet's handwriting. It had not been opened. The postmark was Venice.

MRS PREST. You mean—(*she points to the doors up c*) that she censored the diary?

H.J. We did not immediately guess as much. (*He moves down l.*) But it was at this time that we started making enquiries. We had one salient clue. The postscript to the note written on the field of battle said that should anything happen to the soldier-poet any enquiries that were necessary could be made of a Miss Bordereau, at this address.

MRS PREST. Battle, what battle?

H.J. You will never believe it! The Siege of Venice. Eighteen-hundred-and-fourteen. The old lady cannot be less than one hundred years old. She may even be one hundred and three.

MRS PREST. Impossible!

H.J. (*turning to her*) Why? Mortals have lived longer.

MRS PREST. I mean it's incredible.

H.J. (*moving up c*) When I first heard of her actual existence, it was as if I had been told that Mrs Siddons, or Queen Caroline or Lady Hamilton—the famous one, I mean—were still with us. (*He moves down c*) But I have not the slightest doubt that the old woman now lying asleep beyond those doors is Aspern's "Divine Juliana"—"The Dark Lady of the Italian Cantos".

MRS PREST. But why did you not attempt to see her at once?

H.J. I am coming to that. (*He crosses to the window up l. and looks out*) Joseph Cumnor, who is not only my publisher but who will

share with me whatever laurels are due to those who have rescued this first truly great American poet from oblivion, wrote to her at once. (*He chuckles*) We scarcely dared hope—(*he crosses to c*) after all those years, that there would be a reply, but it was worth trying.

MRS PREST. What was the reply?

H.J. There was no reply. But we had been making enquiries. Cumnor wrote again. (*He takes his wallet from his pocket and extracts a letter*) To his second letter came a sharp answer, written by the woman we suppose to be her niece—more probably her grand-niece. (*He hands the letter to Mrs Prest and quotes it with ease from memory*) “Miss Bordereau requests me to say that she cannot imagine what you mean by troubling us. She has none of Mr Aspern’s ‘literary remains’.” (*He moves down L then circles the table LC and goes to the window*)

MRS PREST (*reading the remainder of the letter*) “Miss Bordereau cannot imagine what you are talking about and she begs you will let her alone.” What a childish hand! Well, perhaps they really haven’t anything. If they deny it flat, how can you be sure?

H.J. (*moving down c*) Don’t you see, Helen? They are too flat, too positive?

MRS PREST. No, I don’t see.

H.J. She calls him “Mister Aspern”.

MRS PREST. What does that imply?

H.J. It implies familiarity.

MRS PREST. Why?

H.J. You don’t refer to “Mister” Shelley or “Mister” Keats, do you?

MRS PREST (*reluctantly*) It implies, I suppose, familiarity.

H.J. (*taking the letter and replacing it in his wallet*) And familiarity implies the possession of tangible objects.

MRS PREST. Now wait!

(H.J. moves down L)

Suppose I had known Shakespeare—suppose I had a lock of his hair, a button of his tunic . . .

H.J. “Doublet—doublet”!

MRS PREST. Doublet, then—would that make me call him “Mister” Shakespeare?

H.J. (*turning to face her; with considerable force*) Yes. If he had been your lover and you wished to keep the secret.

MRS PREST. But, H.J., I wouldn’t have wanted to keep the secret. (*She considers this*) Still, I do see what you mean.

H.J. (*moving c*) Then you can also see why Juliana becomes for us today as potent a mystery as the Dark Lady of the Sonnets has remained for three hundred years.

(*There is a pause*)

MRS PREST. Yes, but Shakespeare is Shakespeare, and in any case, if I remember rightly, even he seems not to have been over-anxious to have the world know who his Dark Lady was. Will the world be that much poorer if Miss Bordereau and her "Mr Aspern" remain in the shadows which they quite obviously cherish?

H.J. (*crossing above Mrs Prest to R of her*) I have no reason to believe that Aspern cherished obscurity. He took no pains to conceal anything. On the contrary. As for her, until five months ago her secret was safe. But when we stumbled on those papers in that attic in Philadelphia, we uncovered the fragments of a genius.

(*He crosses below Mrs Prest and the table to the stove*) When Aspern discovered Italy he discovered himself. He sounded the depth of his own obliquity and he was appalled. But—he never lacked courage and he clung to that. Finally he sought expiation. The last group of poems are like burnt-offerings whose smoke still rises to the gods, long after the tide of battle has sunk without trace into the earth.

MRS PREST (*with gentle irony*) Bravo, Harry, that was splendid!

H.J. (*crossing to the doors up c*) Who knows what treasures of his later genius are not hidden in this house? As for her—(*he moves down c*) there hovers about her name—how shall I say . . . ?

MRS PREST. An intimation of immorality?

H.J. (*wincing slightly*) A perfume of impenitent passion.

MRS PREST. You mean he treated her badly.

H.J. (*moving down L*) Half the women of his time—to speak liberally—flung themselves at his head. While such female fury rages, accidents, some of them grave, cannot fail to occur. I judge him, perhaps more indulgently than you. It has been suggested that he was not "a woman's poet".

MRS PREST. There seems no doubt he was Miss Bordereau's.

(*ASSUNTA enters up the stairs R. MRS PREST turns to her*)

ASSUNTA. La sua gondola arriva adesso.

(*ASSUNTA exits down the stairs*)

MRS PREST (*rising and collecting her parasol*) Thank goodness! I was beginning to think that gondola had foundered somewhere.

(*H.J. reluctantly collects his hat, gloves and stick*)

H.J. (*crossing to c*) Will you come with me again tomorrow, Helen?

MRS PREST. I shall have to consider that.

H.J. (*appalled*) Please, Helen! Without your introduction it will be impossible.

MRS PREST. Why? If a man wants something of a woman he will most likely get it, provided he wants it enough. Part of it, anyway. Sure you'd settle for part of what you want?

H.J. At this moment, I'd settle for the merest glimpse of her eyes, or the sound of her voice.

MRS PREST (*putting on her gloves*) Then think about it. There must be a dozen ways of bringing about an introduction.

H.J. I need more than that. I need grounds for *intimacy*.

MRS PREST. Well, then, say you want to be a lodger, a paying guest.

H.J. (*slowly*) It is not generally supposed easy for women to rise to the large, free view of a matter but they sometimes throw off a brilliant conception.

MRS PREST. We have our uses.

H.J. How shall we begin?

MRS PREST (*pointedly*) You will begin. By—writing them a short note. Do you think they will know your name?

H.J. No, but I will change that.

MRS PREST. What about your letters?

H.J. My publisher will bombard me with letters addressed to me in my feigned name. My banker will take in my real letters and I shall go every day to collect them. It will give me a little walk.

MRS PREST. Well, you and your publisher are a precious pair. I suppose it occurs to you that in spite of all your pains they may still suspect you of being his emissary?

(*There is a pause*)

H.J. (*moving down L*) Yes—and I see only one way to parry that.

MRS PREST. And what may that be?

H.J. I'm not sure I should tell you.

MRS PREST. I call that a little ungrateful.

H.J. (*turning to her*) I'm sorry for it, but there's no baseness I would not commit for the sake of Jeffrey Aspern's papers.

MRS PREST (*amused*) You won't murder the poor women, I hope?

H.J. (*shaking his head; with a smile*) I may not have the tradition of personal conquest, Helen, but any man—if he desires something enough, can put himself in the running, you said so yourself just now.

MRS PREST. The "if" is a big one.

H.J. The stake is big.

MRS PREST. Don't be such a tease, Henry Jarvis. What is your stake?

H.J. My stake is to make love to the niece.

(MRS PREST turns towards the landing. As she approaches the

steps it can be seen that her shoulders are shaking with suppressed laughter)

(He moves c) What are you laughing at? Helen, please! *(He crosses to L of her)* Why are you laughing?

MRS PREST. Never mind! Wait till you've seen her. *(She goes on to the landing and her laughter mounts)* Wait till you've seen her!

(MRS PREST exits down the stairs. H.J. stands for a moment looking after her. He looks towards the windows up L, hesitates, then goes on to the landing)

H.J. *(calling quietly down the stairs)* If you will excuse me, Helen, I will wait five minutes longer. I have an idea.

(There is no answer but the slam of the front door.)

H.J. *pauses for a second, shrugs his shoulders, crosses to the table LC and puts down his hat, stick and gloves. He goes to the french windows up L and opens the shutters. The sala fills with the cool, clear light of a late afternoon in April. H.J. looks out then exits to the balcony. His steps are heard going down the iron stairs into the garden. The bells from the nearby campanile ring out three-quarters of an hour and are echoed by other bells. The last to strike is cracked and jars the romantic noise. Almost immediately one of the double doors is opened. It creaks prodigiously.*

MISS TINA *enters up c. She is a long, lean, pale person. Her face is not young, but candid; not fresh, but clear. She has large eyes which are not bright, and a great deal of brownish, dull hair which is carelessly dressed. Her strong but sensitive hands are not noticeably clean. Her grey dress is fully ten years out of fashion. She wears a black scarf on her head in the Italian style. Her slippers are of raffia, and when she moves they oblige her to scuffle slightly. A chatelaine hangs on a chain at her waist and a silver cross at her neck. She looks towards the landing, listens for a few moments, then crosses and looks out of the landing window. She turns towards the double doors, notices that the shutters are open and turns to the stairs)*

TINA *(calling softly down the stairs)* Assunta! *(She crosses and stands up c)*

(ASSUNTA enters up the stairs and comes into the room)

Assunta why are the shutters . . . ?

(TINA breaks off as ASSUNTA puts her finger dramatically to her lips. TINA, puzzled, goes slightly towards her. ASSUNTA, clutching her throat, mimes that someone is "out there in the garden". TINA gives a frightened look towards the french windows, but from where she is standing she cannot see down into the garden)

ASSUNTA. In giardino!

TINA *(whispering)* But I heard the door slam, I thought they had gone,

ASSUNTA (*whispering*) One gone. One stay. (*She points to H.J.'s hat and stick on the table*)

(TINA has not seen a smart top-hat in this house for years, and she approaches it as if it were a large black spider which she has to kill. She picks it up gingerly and looks inside. H.J.'s gloves fall out of the hat which makes her start)

(*She approaches the table, looking wonderingly at Miss Tina, takes the hat from her and looks inside*) Londra. Inglese!

(*At this moment H.J.'s footsteps are heard ascending from the garden. ASSUNTA and TINA stand in panic for a moment, then TINA moves towards the double doors up c. ASSUNTA, still holding the hat, goes towards the landing. As TINA reaches the doors she notices the hat and hisses at ASSUNTA who stops, turns and looks at her. TINA, with a quick glance to see that H.J. has not already reached the window, snatches the hat from Assunta, hissing again that she should go*)

(*She goes on to the landing, muttering*) Santo Dio!

(ASSUNTA exits rapidly down the stairs. TINA quickly replaces the hat on the table LC, but the wrong way up. She turns towards the double doors and after a pace or two, she turns back to the table and corrects this mistake. She once more moves to the double doors.

H.J. enters from the balcony)

H.J. (*with intense excitement*) Per favore! Il giardino. Mi faccia il piacere di dirmi che'l giardino e il suo!

TINA (*standing up c*) No, no, the garden is not mine. Nothing here is mine.

H.J. (*moving to L of Tina and taking her hand; disingenuously*) Ah! But you're English! How delightful!

(H.J. offers to shake her hand. TINA reluctantly permits this but when, as an afterthought, H.J. then wishes to kiss her hand, she withdraws it and hides it by wrapping it in her shawl)

(*After a pause*) This is deplorable! What must you think of me?

(TINA does not reply)

(*He crosses below Tina to the landing and looks out of the window*) Hasn't my gondola come yet? (*He glances at his watch*) He promised he would be here—oh, an age ago. (*He turns to Tina*) What must you think of me? How did it all happen? (*He moves up RC, starts to improvise wildly but tries at the same time to sound cheerful and urbane*) Yes, that was it—I was going down the Grand Canal when I saw our mutual friend—Mrs Prest, and her friends coming up it—though I am never quite sure which is up and which is down the Grand Canal—are you? Ha, ha!

(TINA does not respond to this lame joke)

Well, we halted our gondolas and, since we had not seen each other for some time, I stepped into *hers* offering to accompany them wherever they might be going. *They* said they were coming *here*, and so on we came. (*He looks at Tina to see how she is taking this*)

(*TINA's expression, though not incredulous, is extremely puzzled. This throws H.J. from his train of invention for a moment*)

(*He moves to R of Tina*) And this is what is so extraordinary—while we were on the way here I told the Contessa—Mrs Prest's friend—that I was looking for a modest palazzo to rent for the Summer. To my simple amazement she said she had a spare one herself, which she occasionally rents. "Ah, but my dear lady," I said to her, "has it a garden? Or at the very least, a large, flowering terrace?" (*He looks at Tina to see if she is following his, so far, plausible tergiversations and lies. He is determined to get a word out of her*)

TINA (*after a pause*) Has it?

H.J. No, it has not.

TINA (*pointing to the garden*) There are no flowers to speak of down there.

H.J. There are quite a few, reckless marguerites. (*He moves a little down c*) I am intending to be in Venice all Summer. Perhaps longer. I have some reading and study ahead of me, and that is why I felt I must be quiet. I don't need exercise, but I do need the open air. That's why I've felt a garden to be really indispensable. I'm sure you'll agree?

TINA (*moving to L of H.J.*) I've told you, the garden doesn't belong to me.

H.J. But it belongs to the house?

TINA. Oh, yes.

H.J. Well, then?

(*TINA clasps her hands compulsively in front of her, glances at them and seeing they are not clean, reclasps them behind her back*)

TINA. Oh, don't take it away from us. We like it. I like it.

H.J. Do you use it?

TINA. Not often. But I like to know it's there.

H.J. Of course you do. It's absurd, if you like, for a man—but I can't live without flowers.

TINA. Oh, we have a few flowers later on. (*She looks towards the garden, then at H.J.*) That trellis of roses needs pruning. It doesn't bloom for long, but when it does it is very pretty.

H.J. (*quoting*)

"I have a garden of my own,
But so with roses overblown,
And lilies, that you would it guess
To be a little wilderness."

TINA (*flatly*) We don't have any lilies. The soil here is old and used up. (*She pauses*) Like the house, I suppose. You've no idea how much it costs to buy new soil and bring it from *terra firma*, from the Veneto. And besides, you need a man.

H.J. (*gaily*) Why shouldn't I be the man?

(TINA looks at him, frightened)

I mean, I'd pay for the gardener. (*He crosses below her to the french windows*) You shall have the sweetest flowers in all Venice. And we will prune the vine and that old magnolia, and soon, soon the magnolia will be thrusting its pink and white petals into the air and the sun—(*he turns and moves up R of the table*) and people passing on the water will gaze at it, like the great Omar, and say:

“But still a Ruby kindles in the Vine,
And still a Garden by the Water blows.”

TINA. I don't think we should like people gazing. (*She crosses above H.J. to the french windows and looks out*)

(*There is a pause*)

H.J. (*looking at his watch; nonplussed*) I wonder if my fool of a gondolier has found this place at last.

(*But H.J. does not go to look. Instead he holds her with his eyes. TINA's expression changes. She turns her back on him and gazes out at the garden*)

TINA. But we don't know you.

H.J. (*with a step towards her*) True, we don't even know each other's name. We start equal. But if you're English I can say I'm almost a fellow-countryman.

TINA (*turning sharply to face him*) We're not English.

H.J. (*as if amazed with admiration*) You speak the language so beautifully.

(TINA looks blankly at him)

You don't mean, by any chance, that you also are an American?

TINA. I don't know. We used to be.

H.J. How do you mean?

TINA. It's so many years ago. We don't seem to be anything now.

H.J. You mean you have lived here for so many years? (*He senses that this question is also too direct and turns away*) Well, I don't wonder at that. (*He moves C*) It's a grand old house. I suppose all the family like to use the garden?

TINA. The family?

H.J. As many as you are . . .

TINA (*moving to L of H.J.*) There's only one other than me.

H.J. (*turning to her*) Only two of you—in all this great house.

But, dear lady, there must be at least thirty rooms. Surely, surely you could let me two or three of them.

TINA. What for?

H.J. (*after a second's pause*) For a good rent.

(*There is a pause*)

TINA. I mean—"why"?

H.J. Because—I have business to do in Venice (*He moves R*) Work in Venice. Friends in Venice. And I need a garden—also in Venice. Like most expatriate Americans, I am a migrant bird. (*He turns and takes a step towards her*) At each change of the seasons I look for a new, faraway nest.

TINA. What do you do?

H.J. Do?

TINA. Do—when you are not looking for nests.

H.J. (*temporizing with a chuckle*) Ah, what a shrewd sense of humour you have. Well—someday, perhaps you will permit me to tell you of all that. It is work of a—well—chiefly of a personal nature. I need time for study, I need quiet, stillness, and for health's sake, some fresh air.

TINA. You cannot find these things where you come from?

H.J. In America? Yes, I suppose there is still fresh air in America. Quiet and stillness in the mountains of Vermont or the Arizona desert. But for my work further conditions are required. I need an aura of history and the sense of the past. America is a great country, but she is still so bewitchingly—so heartrendingly—young. America is agog for history. The rustle of the corn, the whisper of the long grass, the very buds as they burst open in the Spring, deafen your ears with the sound of America's history still unborn. I cannot wait for that. By soul I am a European. I may pay my respects to posterity. I cannot ignore the here and now, but for me the present and the future are both rooted in the past—(*he turns up stage and moves towards the landing*) and here, where the long arm of the Adriatic sweeps up to embrace the city which is his bride, I find all my conditions fulfilled—if only I may have a garden. (*He turns to face Tina*) Do you see what I mean?

TINA (*simply*) You mean, Venice is old.

H.J. (*moving to R of her*) I mean, do you think you could rent me the rooms?

TINA (*turning away L*) I should have to ask my aunt.

H.J. (*smiling, as if he had not heard*) I beg your pardon?

TINA (*turning to him*) Miss Bordereau. I shall have to ask her.

H.J. Will she be back soon?

TINA. Oh, no. She is asleep in there. I was reading to her when you all arrived and shortly afterwards she fell asleep.

H.J. (*somewhat too sternly*) The maid said you were at church.

TINA (*embarrassed*) I did not tell her to say that.

H.J. Your aunt—she is not ill, I hope?

TINA. She rests all the time. That's why I never leave the house.

H.J. I shall look forward to her acquaintance. When do you think you could ask her?

TINA (*moving above the table LC*) We're very poor, we live very badly—almost on nothing. (*She indicates the room*) Look! You see, we've sold almost everything there is to sell.

(H.J. is silent, feeling that victory is within grasp)

But flowers! Oh, my goodness, flowers! (*She moves about as if released from a spell, and stands down 1. of the table*) If we could make the garden and the house look even just a little like it looked in the old days. Flowers in the house again. Oh, what bliss!

H.J. (*moving to R of the table LC*) It will be my privilege to provide them for you. To watch your face as it is now will, occasionally, be my reward. You have told me your aunt's name. What is yours?

TINA (*the smile draining from her face*) Everyone calls me "Miss Tina".

H.J. Miss Tina?

(TINA nods)

That is a very charming name.

(TINA's smile lights up again, but when she finds H.J. gazing at her, it drains away)

What do you say, Miss Tina?

TINA. But we've never done anything of the sort. We've never taken in lodgers, I mean . . .

(H.J. starts to speak)

(*She over-rides him*) No, please listen. Most of the rooms are very bare. There's nothing at all in some of them. I don't know how you'd sleep. How you'd live. (*She is near tears, but laughs like a schoolgirl*) Isn't it dreadful?

(H.J. is now certain that his conquest has begun. For the rest of the scene he switches on the quiet charm of a friend who is used to dealing with family troubles)

H.J. (*chuckling*) It's not dreadful at all. (*He crosses to RC*) With your permission—and that of your aunt—I could easily put in a few tables and chairs. *C'est la moindre des choses*. My manservant and my gondolier can bring the things round as soon as you give me the word.

TINA. I don't know what my aunt will say.

H.J. (*moving to R of the table*) She will probably consider the whole thing very *louche*. But I shall depend on you.

TINA. I shouldn't do that.

H.J. Well, then, on the flowers.

TINA. Oh, no! On the money!

(For a moment this causes H.J. to lose his sense of "personal conquest" and his look of friendliness narrows sharply. His eyes have not left her face)

H.J. *(picking up his hat, stick and gloves)* When will you talk to your aunt?

TINA *(turning away up Lc)* Tonight.

H.J. And when will you let me know?

TINA. Tomorrow. If I can.

H.J. *(crossing to L of Tina)* Tomorrow? At what time?

TINA. About three o'clock.

H.J. I should call here at three o'clock?

TINA *(moving c)* I may keep you waiting a little.

H.J. If I may feel that you favour the idea the wait will be endurable. *(He looks at his watch then takes a step towards her)* I must go now. *(He puts his hand out as if to shake hers)* Au revoir! A demain!

(TINA makes no move)

(He crosses above Tina to the landing) Please do not trouble yourself to see me out.

TINA *(suddenly; for she has been saving this up)* You haven't told me your name. *(She moves to L of him)*

H.J. Oh, how stupid of me.

(H.J.'s hand automatically reaches for his visiting card. He brings it out and is about to present it when he recollects himself)

Oh, no, that's somebody else's. Henry Jessamine, Miss Tina. Mr Henry Jessamine.

TINA. Jessamine? That's a flower, isn't it?

H.J. *(eagerly)* That reminds me: what are your favourite, your truly favourite flowers?

TINA *(without hesitation)* Roses, of course.

H.J. What colour?

TINA *(gaily)* What does the colour matter?

H.J. Red?

(TINA nods her head ecstatically. A spring bell at the head of the stairs rings shrilly)

TINA *(panic stricken)* It's my aunt's bell. Forgive me.

(TINA turns to exit by the double doors, but leaves one slipper behind. She and H.J. both go to pick it up but H.J. gets there first. He hands it to TINA and she hurries out in confusion up c, closing the doors. H.J., left alone, tiptoes swiftly to the double doors. At this moment ASSUNTA is heard coming up the stairs. H.J. moves quickly up L.)

ASSUNTA enters on the landing)

ASSUNTA (*gruffly*) The signore is going?

H.J. I rather think Miss Tina expects me to stay--- (*he crosses down R*) but I must be off soon. (*He looks at his watch to give this lie a faint colour*)

(ASSUNTA goes to the double doors and opens one. It creaks as usual)

TINA (*off*) Yes?

ASSUNTA. Assunta.

TINA (*off; calling*) It's all right. I'll be out in a minute. Has the American gentleman gone?

ASSUNTA. No.

TINA. Ask him to wait, please.

ASSUNTA (*closing the door and moving down C*) You will wait here, please. Make yourself at home.

H.J. The old lady—she is not ill, I hope?

ASSUNTA. She will see us all buried. (*She moves towards the landing*)

(TINA enters up C, smiling)

TINA. Assunta, go in and look after my aunt.

(ASSUNTA exits up C, leaving the door open)

(*She moves down C*) Isn't it fortunate? She woke up. One can hear nothing from her bedroom at the back, but she said she sensed there were visitors.

H.J. I hope she isn't displeased that I have over-stayed your most charming welcome. (*He puts his hat, stick and gloves on the chair down R*)

TINA. Oh, I don't think so at all. I told her of your plan.

H.J. (*turning sharply to her*) My plan?

TINA. About the rooms.

H.J. Oh! What did she say?

TINA (*eagerly*) She said she'd like to see you. It's so unlike her. Well, no, it isn't really. She hates appointments and she gave up her tea parties long ago but sometimes, if someone calls, she suddenly wants to meet them. Isn't it strange?

H.J. Not at all. Very understandable.

(MISS JULIANA BORDEREAU in her wheel chair, is pushed on up C by ASSUNTA. JULIANA is a very small, shrunken figure, bent forward a little, with her hands in her lap. She is dressed in a black gown and shawl which look almost beetle-green with the patina of age. She wears a dark green eye shade, and over her head is an old black lace mantilla. Only her chin, mouth and nose are visible; the eyes and every trace of hair are hidden. Despite this, the tiny, still figure is impressive. She speaks in a thin, weak voice which has an agreeable, cultured sound.

TINA goes to the wheel chair and takes over from Assunta.

ASSUNTA closes the double doors, then exits down the stairs R.
TINA wheels Juliana down C, and looks round as if to see if there might be a draught somewhere. She also manages to give H.J. a small smile. During the ensuing conversation TINA remains standing behind the wheel chair)

(After a pause) I hope I see you well, Miss Bordereau.

JULIANA. As well as you will ever see me, sir.

H.J. This is kind of you.

JULIANA. How so?

H.J. (raising his voice and approaching her) Kind of you to leave your sanctum to meet a stranger.

JULIANA. I can hear quite well. Please to sit down.

(H.J. glances at TINA who gives him a nervous smile. He then sits on the chair up R, pulling it slightly to C)

H.J. Thank you.

JULIANA. Sanctum? Is it my parlour you mean, or my bedroom?

(H.J. looks nonplussed and glances again at TINA. She smiles and while still looking at him conspiratorially bends over Juliana as a nurse might with her patient)

TINA. I don't think we're quite awake yet, are we?

JULIANA (with sudden sharpness) We are wide-awake and we don't need you cawing like a crow over our shoulder. Tina, go in and write that letter to the lawyer. You know what I mean.

TINA (moving to the doors up C) Yes, Auntie.

(H.J. rises and moves to the doors up C)

JULIANA. Write it neatly.

TINA (quite deflated) Yes, Auntie.

(TINA exits up C. H.J. resumes his seat)

JULIANA. Our house is not fashionable. It is far from the centre. But this canal is still very *comme il faut*.

H.J. It is the sweetest corner of Venice. I can imagine nothing more charming.

(JULIANA utters a small noise and seems to toss her head slightly)

JULIANA. Miss Tina tells me you want to buy the house.

H.J. No, no! I did not suggest that.

JULIANA. What then?

H.J. How shall I begin?

JULIANA. At the beginning.

H.J. Well, first and foremost, there is the garden.

JULIANA. Go on.

H.J. It was a case of love at first sight.

JULIANA (expressionlessly) Indeed.

H.J. You have been here so long—you cannot realize the impression it makes on a stranger. I felt it was a case to risk something. I hope that your kindness in receiving me is a sign that I am not wholly out in my calculation.

JULIANA. I cannot imagine what you are talking about, Mr—er . . . ?

H.J. Jessamine. Henry Jessamine.

JULIANA. You are American? You don't sound like an American.

H.J. If you will permit me to say so, neither do you. Nor does that lady—is she your niece?

JULIANA (*disregarding the question*) If you're so fond of a garden why don't you lodge on the mainland? There are many gardens on *terra firma* far better than this.

H.J. But don't you understand? It's the idea of a garden in the middle of the sea.

JULIANA. This isn't the middle of the sea. You can't even see the water. (*She slowly removes her eye shade*)

(*There is a long pause. H.J. gazes at Juliana*)

H.J. But, my dear lady, I came up to your very gate in my boat.

JULIANA. Yes, if you've got a boat. (*She sounds vague and distant and as if she had suddenly lost her energy*) It's many years since I have been in one of the gondole.

H.J. (*eagerly*) Let me assure you that my pleasure would be to put mine at your service.

JULIANA. Miss Tina tells me you talked with her a long time.

H.J. Miss Tina has been very patient with me.

JULIANA. She has very good manners. I brought her up myself.

H.J. Ah! . . . (*He tails off, unable to enlarge the compliment*)

JULIANA (*suddenly*) I don't know who you may be, sir—

H.J. I was just about to tell you . . .

JULIANA (*overlapping*)—and I don't want to know. It signifies very little. Very little today. Miss Tina tells me you are a good-talker. Folk now-a-days don't know what "talk" means. You may have as many rooms as you like if you will pay me a good deal of money.

(*H.J. is dumb for a moment*)

H.J. I will pay with pleasure and of course in advance whatever you think it proper to ask of me.

JULIANA (*without hesitation*) Well then, a thousand lire a month.

(*H.J. looks startled for a moment but composes himself*)

What do you say to that?

H.J. I say your views on the matter perfectly meet with my own.

(*JULIANA gives a soft grunt*)

(*He springs to his feet*) Then that is settled.

JULIANA. Not quite settled. When will you pay me?

H.J. Let me see—tomorrow—may I, tomorrow, have the pleasure of placing a month's rent in your hand?

JULIANA. You may.

H.J. (*feeling that she is being altogether too grasping*) Of course it is a slight matter, but I have not yet seen the rooms you propose for me.

JULIANA. Tomorrow, when you bring the money.

H.J. But supposing . . .

JULIANA. You will like the rooms well enough. More important people than you have liked them.

H.J. I only meant that a glimpse of them might give me some notion of what I should need to . . .

JULIANA. Sir! If you are going to haggle, the matter is closed.

(*TINA opens the door up to a fraction, hardly shows herself and whispers apologetically*)

TINA. I am sorry to interrupt. Is the letter to be to Signor Pochintesta or to his partner?

JULIANA. Come in.

(*TINA comes into the room and closes the door behind her*)

H.J. (*moving towards Tina*) It is all settled.

JULIANA. He seems to think I am trying to sell him a pig in a poke.

(*TINA moves to L of the wheel chair*)

He is haggling.

H.J. (*moving and standing behind his chair*) On the contrary . . .

JULIANA. You'd think he'd come here to do us a favour.

H.J. My dear Miss Bordereau! (*He swallows his pride*) I am exceedingly sorry that I should have given you such an impression. Everything shall be entirely as you wish.

JULIANA (*almost gaily*) He'll give three thousand. Three thousand tomorrow.

H.J. I see. Three months in advance.

JULIANA. That was what you said, wasn't it?

H.J. (*patiently*) Of course.

TINA (*looking from one to the other*) Do you mean *lire*?

JULIANA. Dollars or *lire*?

H.J. (*smiling sturdily*) I think *lire* is what we said.

TINA. That's very good, all the same.

JULIANA (*with a soft coldness*) What do you know? You're ignorant.

TINA. Oh, yes. Of money I am—certainly of money.

H.J. I'm sure you have your own fine branches of knowledge. (*With a reckless gaiety*) Dollars, *lire*, roubles or pounds—who cares?

JULIANA. She had a good education when she was young. I saw to that myself. But she has learned nothing since.

TINA (*mildly*) I have always been with you.

JULIANA. Yes, *but for that* . . .

(TINA *blushes*)

(*To H.J.*) And what time did you say you'd bring the money?

H.J. Whenever you say. I shall have to visit the bank. If it suits you, I'll come at noon.

JULIANA. I'm always here, but I have my hours.

H.J. You mean the times you receive?

JULIANA. I never receive. But I'll see you at noon.

H.J. Very good.

JULIANA. With the money.

H.J. I think we have made *that* point quite clear. (*He moves to R of the wheel chair*) May we shake hands on our contract?

(JULIANA *makes no movement*)

(*He repeats his request in a perceptible tone of emotion*) Miss Bordereau, may I, to seal this moment, shake your hand? (*He offers his hand*)

JULIANA (*ignoring H.J.'s hand*) I belong to a time when that was not the custom.

(H.J. *is at a loss for a moment but turns to Tina*)

H.J. Oh, you'll do as well. (*He forcefully wrings Tina's hand*)

TINA (*fluttering*) Yes, yes. Just to show we're all friends.

(JULIANA *makes her first gesture*)

JULIANA. Tina!

TINA. Yes, Auntie? (*She releases H.J.'s hand and starts to wheel Juliana out. She pushes the chair down stage and backwards down L to face H.J.*)

(H.J. *bows*.)

ASSUNTA *enters up the stairs, crosses to the double doors and opens them. JULIANA raises her hand. TINA stops the wheel chair*)

JULIANA. Shall you bring the money in gold?

H.J. Aren't you a little afraid, after all, of keeping such a sum as that in the house?

JULIANA. Of whom should I be afraid, if not of you?

H.J. (*laughing easily*) In point of fact I shall be a protector. I'll bring you gold if you prefer.

JULIANA. Yes. Do. (*She gives a curt nod of the head, indicating dismissal*)

(H.J. *bows. TINA pushes the wheel chair up C.*)

ASSUNTA, *at a gesture from TINA, wheels Juliana off up C. TINA closes the double doors*)

H.J. (*moving to Tina*) I've had better fortune than I dared to hope.

(TINA and H.J. move down C, H.J. is R of Tina)

TINA. Is it so important to you? It's such a little matter.

H.J. It's a little garden but no little matter.

TINA. You seem so excited.

H.J. Do I? I hope I did not alarm your aunt?

TINA. She is not easily alarmed.

H.J. Did you put in a good word for me?

TINA (*shaking her head*) I had no time. No, it was the idea of the money. I told her I thought you were rich.

H.J. And what put that into your head?

TINA. The way you talked.

H.J. Dear me, I must talk differently now. I'm sorry to say it's not the case.

TINA. Well, I think that in Venice foreigners often give a great deal for something that after all isn't much.

H.J. A truer word was never spoken.

(H.J. picks up his gloves and cane and once more paces round the room)

Ah, but this is a fine room. Certainly a fine room in its way.

TINA. I do not like it and in winter it is cold.

H.J. (*cheerfully*) A room cannot have all the virtues. (*He moves to the french windows*) It's coolness is a benison now.

TINA. Will you let me know something?

H.J. (*turning to face her*) If it is within my knowledge.

TINA. Do all writers talk the way you do?

H.J. Writers?

TINA. Yes. Authors. *You* know.

H.J. (*moving to R of the table LC*) Oh, you mean my bookwork. Ah, yes, well—I am a very minor, very humble scribbler. A bit of an historian, a bit of an essayist. I imagine my enemies call me a dilettante and my friends an amateur. When they come to write my obituary I suppose I shall go down as a man of letters.

TINA. You mean they'll write a piece about you when you die? In the papers? Then you must be famous.

H.J. (*moving to L of her*) Ah, no! Fame, true fame, is for the very few. There will be a paragraph or two. Perhaps—three paragraphs. I only hope they are written by the right man. (*He senses he has got on to dangerous ground*) But let us not talk about me. What were we saying? Oh, yes, this room. (*He turns to the windows and back*) Will it, do you suppose, form part of my *quartiere*?

(H.J.'s boldness dumbfounds TINA)

TINA. Not if you go above—to the second floor.

H.J. I infer that is where your aunt would like me to be.

TINA. She said your apartment ought to be very distinct. But whenever you use the garden or are on your way upstairs—*(she gestures to the garden with one hand and the stairs with the other)* you will be free to use this room.

(H.J. does not answer but looks vaguely upward)

(She moves to R of him) Please do not ask me to show the other rooms now. They are all unswept and I'm afraid there's a large bird's nest in one of them, but we'll soon get all that seen to. They used to be very fine rooms.

(There is a slight pause. H.J. again does not answer. He is wondering whether the game is worth the candle. He makes a small, deprecatory gesture)

I don't know whether it will make any difference to you, but the money is for me.

H.J. The money?

TINA. The money you are going to bring.

H.J. You'll make me want to stay here two or three years.

TINA. That would be good for me.

H.J. You put me on my honour.

TINA. She wants me to have more. She thinks she's going to die.

H.J. Not soon, I hope!

TINA. One can never tell. She says she's tired of living and she would like to die—"for a change". All her friends are dead. She says she ought to have gone too, or else one or two of the nice ones should have stayed. But she thinks that when I'm alone I shall be a great fool and not know how to manage. *(Suddenly)* People don't just die when they want to, do they?

H.J. *(crossing above Tina and picking up his hat)* It is certainly not the general rule. She—er—seemed—how shall I say—a little suspicious of me.

TINA *(turning to him)* How can you say that, when she let you in so easily?

H.J. You call that "easily"? What possible advantage could I take of either of you? *(He moves towards the landing)*

TINA. I oughtn't to tell you even if I knew, ought I? *(She turns outwards to up c, to face H.J.)* Do you . . . I mean do you think we have any weak points?

H.J. If you had you would only have to mention them for me to respect them religiously.

TINA. But there's nothing to tell. We're terribly quiet. I don't know how the days pass. We have no life.

H.J. *(with a step towards her)* I should like to think I might bring you a little.

TINA. Oh, we know what we want. It's all right.

H.J. (*moving closer to her*) Well, don't you be too proud—or shy. Don't hide away from me altogether.

TINA. Oh, I have to stay with my aunt. I must.

H.J. And I must go now. (*He holds out his hand*)

TINA (*impulsively*) Don't you think it's too much?

(H.J. *looks questioningly at her*)

Don't you think the money is too much?

H.J. (*taking her hand and holding it firmly*) That will depend. Oh yes, that will depend—on the *pleasure* I get out of it.

(TINA *looks away*)

TINA. Oh, pleasure, pleasure—there's no pleasure in this house.

H.J. *kisses her hand. TINA turns to him in astonishment. He releases her hand, bows again and goes to the landing. He starts to go down the stairs. TINA remains gazing after him, her hand still in mid-air, motionless, as—*

the CURTAIN falls

ACT II

SCENE I

SCENE—*The same. Six weeks later. Afternoon.*

When the CURTAIN rises there has been some change in the furniture.

The circular table is now RC and has upright chairs R, L and above it, and it is covered with a red chenille cloth. An upholstered "sociable" couch is LC. The console table up LC is now the right way up. A small pedestal table stands down R and there is a tall pedestal above the french windows and a small chair below them. The whole room is a little more like itself and looks warmer than it has before. Perhaps it is the summer sun which streams in through the french windows, but what most strikes the eye is a profusion of flowers; they are everywhere, in great summer bunches, a vase of roses on the table down R, a vase of roses on the table RC, a vase of roses on the pedestal up L and vases of mixed flowers on the console tables R and L of the double doors. ASSUNTA is by the table RC, squinting inquisitively at the letters and parcels of newspapers which lie there unopened. Her rag bandage at her throat is gone. PASQUALE enters down the stairs R and stops on the landing, watching Assunta examining the envelopes. Rope-soled shoes help him to do this silently. PASQUALE is H.J.'s temporary manservant, and is a sly, neat fellow of indeterminate age. He speaks excellent English, is observant and intelligent. He is, however, a social snob. He is most respectful to his temporary master but the arrangements, or lack of them, in this household distress him. He is anxious to leave Italy and be in service again in England, as he once was. America, he thinks, might suit him even better. He is so fiercely Anglophile that he insists on speaking English even to Assunta. He is carrying H.J.'s tail suit which he will press in the kitchen.

PASQUALE (*after a pause; quietly*) Are you expecting a love letter, Assunta? (*He moves and stands above the table RC*)

ASSUNTA (*looking up and dropping the letters negligently on the table*) Io? No! (*She crosses to C*)

(PASQUALE puts the suit on the chair above the table and arranges the letters and packets in the way he likes to see them)

Dov'è il padrone?

PASQUALE. My master is out.

ASSUNTA. E quando torna?

PASQUALE (*taking a nail file from his pocket*) Mr Jessamine did not say when he would be back. (*He files his nails*) He has been out all day. Why do you not polish your English, Assunta, like I do?

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