

"Because the painters themselves didn't really know what was underneath!"

Gladys Ponsonby paused to take a few more sips of brandy. "Don't look so startled, Lionel," she said to me. "There's nothing wrong about this. Keep quiet and let me finish. So then Mr Royden said, 'That's why I insist on painting my subjects first of all in the nude.'

"Good Heavens, Mr Royden!" I exclaimed.

"If you object to that, I don't mind making a slight concession, Lady Ponsonby," he said. "But I prefer it the other way."

"Really, Mr Royden, I don't know."

"And when I've done you like that," he went on, "we'll have to wait a few weeks for the paint to dry. Then you come back and I paint on your underclothing. And when that's dry, I paint on the dress. You see, it's quite simple."

"The man's an absolute bounder!" I cried.

"No, Lionel, no! You're quite wrong. If only you could have heard him, so charming about it all, so genuine and sincere. Anyone could see he really felt what he was saying."

"I tell you, Gladys, the man's a bounder!"

"Don't be so silly, Lionel. And anyway, let me finish. The first thing I told him was that my husband (who was alive then) would never agree."

"Your husband need never know," he answered. "Why trouble him. No one knows my secret except the women I've painted."

"And when I protested a bit more, I remember he said, 'My dear Lady Ponsonby, there's nothing immoral about this. Art is only immoral when practised by amateurs. It's the same with medicine. You wouldn't refuse to undress before your doctor, would you?'"

"I told him I would if I'd gone to him for ear-ache. That made him laugh. But he kept on at me about it and I must say he was very convincing, so after a while I gave in and that was that. So now, Lionel, my sweet, you know the secret." She got up and went over to fetch herself some more brandy.

"Gladys, is this really true?"

"Of course it's true."

"You mean to say that's the way he paints all his subjects?"

"Yes. And the joke is the husbands never know anything about it. All they see is a nice fully clothed portrait of their wives. Of course, there's nothing wrong with being painted in the nude; artists do it all the time. But our silly husbands have a way of objecting to that sort of thing."

"By gad, the fellow's got a nerve!"

"I think he's a genius."

"I'll bet he got the idea from Goya."

"Nonsense, Lionel."

"Of course he did. But listen, Gladys, I want you to tell me something."

Did you by any chance know about this... this peculiar technique of Royden's before you went to him?"

When I asked the question she was in the act of pouring the brandy, and she hesitated and turned her head to look at me, a little silky smile moving the corners of her mouth. "Damn you, Lionel," she said. "You're far too clever. You never let me get away with a single thing."

"So you knew?"

"Of course. Hermione Girdlestone told me."

"Exactly as I thought!"

"There's still nothing wrong."

"Nothing." I said. "Absolutely nothing." I could see it all quite clearly now. This Royden was indeed a bounder, practising as neat a piece of psychological trickery as ever I'd seen. The man knew only too well that there was a whole set of wealthy indolent women in the city who got up at noon and spent the rest of the day trying to relieve their boredom with bridge and canasta and shopping until the cocktail hour came along. All they craved was a little excitement, something out of the ordinary, and the more expensive the better. Why the news of an entertainment like this would spread through their ranks like smallpox. I could just see the great plump Hermione Girdlestone leaning over the canasta table and telling them about it 'But my dear, it's simply fascinating... I can't tell you how intriguing it is... much more fun than going to your doctor...' "You won't tell anyone, Lionel, will you? You promised."

"No, of course not. But now I must go, Gladys, I really must."

"Don't be so silly. I'm just beginning to enjoy myself. Stay till I've finished this drink, anyway."

I sat patiently on the sofa while she went on with her interminable brandy sipping. The little buried eyes were still watching me out of their corners in that mischievous, canny way, and I had a strong feeling that the woman was now hatching out some further unpleasantness or scandal. There was the look of serpents in those eyes and a queer curl around the mouth; and in the air--although maybe I only imagined it--the faint smell of danger.

Then suddenly, so suddenly that I jumped, she said, "Lionel, what's this I hear about you and Janet de Pelagia?"

"Now. Gladys, please..

"Lionel, you're blushing!"

"Nonsense."

"Don't tell me the old bachelor has really taken a tumble at last?"

"Gladys, this is too absurd." I began making movements to go, but she put a hand on my knee and stopped me.

"Don't you know by now, Lionel, that there are no secrets?"

"Janet is a fine girl."

"You can hardly call her a girl." Gladys Ponsonby paused, staring down into the large brandy glass that she held cupped in both hands. "But of course, I agree with you, Lionel, she's a wonderful person in every way. Except," and now she spoke very slowly, "except that she does say some rather peculiar things occasionally."

"What sort of things?"

"Just things, you know--things about people. About you."

"What did she say about me?"

"Nothing at all, Lionel. It wouldn't interest you."

"What did she say about me?"

"It's not even worth repeating, honestly it isn't. It's only that it struck me as being rather odd at the time."

"Gladys--what did she say?" While I waited for her to answer, I could feel the sweat breaking out all over my body.

"Well now, let me see. Of course, she was only joking or I couldn't dream of telling you, but I suppose she did say how it was all a wee bit of a bore."

"What was?"

"Sort of going out to dinner with you nearly every night that kind of thing."

"She said it was a bore?"

"Yes." Gladys Ponsonby drained the brandy glass with one last big gulp, and sat up straight. "If you really want to know, she said it was a crashing bore. And then.."

"What did she say then?"

"Now look, Lionel--there's no need to get excited. I'm only telling you this for your own good."

"Then please hurry up and tell it."

"It's just that I happened to be playing canasta with Janet this afternoon and I asked her if she was free to dine with me tomorrow. She said no, she wasn't."

"Go on."

"Well--actually what she said was 'I'm dining with that crashing old bore Lionel Lampson.'"

"Janet said that?"

"Yes, Lionel dear."

"What else?"

"Now, that's enough. I don't think I should tell the rest."

"Finish it, please!"

"Why, Lionel, don't keep shouting at me like that. Of course I'll tell you if you insist. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't consider myself a true friend if I didn't. Don't you think it's the sign of true friendship when two people like u

S... "

"Gladys! Please hurry."

"Good heavens, you must give me time to think. Let me see now--so far as I can remember, what she actually said was this..

-and Gladys Ponsonby, sitting upright on the sofa with her feet not quite touching the floor, her eyes away from me now, looking at the wall, began cleverly to mimic the deep tone of that voice I knew so well--"Such a bore, my dear, because with Lionel one can always tell exactly what will happen right from beginning to end. For dinner we'll go to the Savoy Grill--it's always the Savoy Grill--and for two hours I'll have to listen to the pompous old ... I mean I'll have to listen to him droning away about pictures and porcelain--always pictures and porcelain. Then in the taxi going home he'll reach out for my hand, and he'll lean closer, and I'll get a whiff of stale cigar smoke and brandy, and he'll start burbling about how he wished--oh, how he wished he was just twenty years younger. And I will say, 'Could you open a window, do you mind?' And when we arrive at my house I'll tell him to keep the taxi, but he'll pretend he hasn't heard and pay it off quickly. And then at the front door, while I fish for my key, he'll stand beside me with a sort of silly spaniel look in his eyes, and I'll slowly put the key in the lock, and slowly turn it, and then--very quickly, before he has time to move--I'll say good night and skip inside and shut the door behind me... ' Why, Lionel ! What's the matter, dear? You look positively ill.

At that point, mercifully, I must have swooned clear away. I can remember practically nothing of the rest of that terrible night except for a vague and disturbing suspicion that when I regained consciousness I broke down completely and permitted Gladys Ponsonby to comfort me in a variety of different ways. Later, I believe I walked out of the house and was driven home, but I remained more or less unconscious of everything around me until I woke up in my bed the next morning.

I awoke feeling weak and shaken. I lay still with my eyes closed, trying to piece together the events of the night before Gladys Ponsonby's living-room, Gladys on the sofa sipping brandy, the little puckered face, the mouth that was like a salmon's mouth, the things she had said What was it she had said? Ah, yes. About me. My God, yes! About Janet and me! Those outrageous, unbelievable remarks! Could Janet really have made them? Could she?

I can remember with what terrifying swiftness my hatred of Janet de Pelagia now began to grow. It all happened in a few minutes--a sudden, violent weling up of a hatred that filled me till I thought I was going to burst. I tried to dismiss it, but it was on me like a fever, and in no time at all I was hunting around, as would some filthy gangster, for a method of revenge.

A curious way to behave, you may say, for a man such as me; to which I would answer no, not really, if you consider the circumstances. To my mind,

this was the sort of thing that could drive a man to murder. As a matter of fact, had it not been for a small sadistic streak that caused me to seek a more subtle and painful punishment for my victim, I might well have become a murderer myself. But mere killing, I decided, was too good for this woman, and far too crude for my own taste. So I began looking for a superior alternative.

I am not normally a scheming person; I consider it an odious business and have had no practice in it whatsoever. But fury and hate can concentrate a man's mind to an astonishing degree, and in no time at all a plot was forming and unfolding in my head--a plot so superior and exciting that I began to be quite carried away at the idea of it. By the time I had filled in the details and overcome one or two minor objections, my brooding vengeful mood had changed to one of extreme elation, and I remember how I started bouncing up and down absurdly on my bed and clapping my hands. The next thing I knew I had the telephone directory on my lap and was searching eagerly for a name. I found it, picked up the phone, and dialled the number.

"Hello," I said. "Mr Royden? Mr John Royden?"

"Speaking." Well--it wasn't difficult to persuade the man to call around and see me for a moment. I had never met him, but of course he knew my name, both as an important collector of paintings and as a person of some consequence in society. I was a big fish for him to catch.

"Let me see now, Mr Lampson," he said, "I think I ought to be free in about a couple of hours. Will that be all right?"

I told him it would be fine, gave my address, and rang off.

I jumped out of bed. It was really remarkable how exhilarated I felt all of a sudden. One moment I had been in an agony of despair, contemplating murder and suicide and I don't know what, the next, I was whistling an aria from Puccini in my bath. Every now and again I caught myself rubbing my hands together in a devilish fashion, and once, during my exercises, when I overbalanced doing a double-knee-bend, I sat on the floor and giggled like a schoolboy.

At the appointed time Mr John Royden was shown in to my library and I got up to meet him. He was a small neat man with a slightly ginger goatee beard. He wore a black velvet jacket, a rust-brown tie, a red pullover, and black suede shoes. I shook his small neat hand.

"Good of you to come along so quickly, Mr Royden."

"Not at all, sir." The man's lips--like the lips of nearly all bearded men--looked wet and naked, a trifle indecent, shining pink in among all that hair. After telling him again how much I admired his work, I got straight down to business.

"Mr Royden," I said. "I have a rather unusual request to make of you, something quite personal in its way."

"Yes, Mr Lampson?" He was sitting in the chair opposite me and he cocked his head over to one side, quick and perky like a bird.

"Of course, I know I can trust you to be discreet about anything I say."

"Absolutely, Mr Lampson."

"All right. Now my proposition is this: there is a certain lady in town here whose portrait I would like you to paint. I very much want to possess a fine painting of her. But there are certain complications. For example, I have my own reasons for not wishing her to know that it is I who am commissioning the portrait."

"You mean..

"Exactly, Mr Royden. That is exactly what I mean. As a man of the world I'm sure you will understand."

He smiled, a crooked little smile that only just came through his beard, and he nodded his head knowingly up and down.

"Is it not possible," I said, "that a man might be--how shall I put it?--extremely fond of a lady and at the same time have his own good reasons for not wishing her to know about it yet?"

"More than possible, Mr Lampson." with a man has to stalk his quarry with great caution, waiting patiently for the right moment to reveal himself."

"Precisely, Mr Lampson."

"There are better ways of catching a bird than by chasing it through the woods."

"Yes, indeed, Mr Lampson."

"Putting salt on its tail, for instance."

"Ha-ha?"

"All right, Mr Royden, I think you understand. Now--do you happen by any chance to know a lady called Janet de Pelagia?"

"Janet de Pelagia? Let me see now--yes. At least, what I mean is I've heard of her. I couldn't exactly say I know her."

"That's a pity. It makes it a little more difficult. Do you think you could get to meet her--perhaps at a cocktail party or something like that?"

"Shouldn't be too tricky, Mr Lampson."

"Good, because what I suggest is this: that you go up to her and tell her she's the sort of model you've been searching for for years--just the right face, the right figure, the right coloured eyes. You know the sort of thing. Then ask her if she'd mind sitting for you free of charge. Say you'd like to do a picture of her for next year's Academy. I feel sure she'd be delighted to help you, and honoured too, if I may say so. Then you will paint her and exhibit the picture and deliver it to me after the show is over. No one but you need know that I have bought it."

The small round eyes of Mr Royden were watching me shrewdly, I thought, and the head was again cocked over to one side. He was sitting on the edge of

f his chair, and in this position, with the pullover making a flash of red down his front, he reminded me of a robin on a twig listening for a suspicious noise.

"There's really nothing wrong about it at all," I said. "Just call it--if you like--a harmless little conspiracy being perpetrated by a... well by a rather romantic old man."

"I know, Mr Lampson, I know..." He still seemed to be hesitating, so I said quickly, "I'll be glad to pay you double your usual fee."

That did it. The man actually licked his lips. "Well, Mr Lampson, I must say this sort of thing's not really in my line, you know. But all the same, it'd be a very heartless man who refused such a--shall I say such a romantic assignment?"

"I should like a full-length portrait, Mr Royden, please. A large canvas--let me see about twice the size of that Manet on the wall there."

"About sixty by thirty-six?"

"Yes. And I should like her to be standing. That to my mind, is her most graceful attitude."

"I quite understand, Mr Lampson. And it'll be a pleasure to paint such a lovely lady."

I expect it will, I told myself. The way you go about it, my boy, I'm quite sure it will, But I said, "All right, Mr Royden, then I'll leave it all to you. And don't forget, please--this is a little secret between ourselves."

When he had gone I forced myself to sit still and take twenty-five deep breaths. Nothing else would have restrained me from jumping up and shouting for joy like an idiot. I have never in my life felt so exhilarated. My plan was working! The most difficult part was already accomplished. There would be a wait now, a long wait. The way this man painted, it would take him several months to finish the picture. Well, I would just have to be patient, that's all.

I now decided, on the spur of the moment, that it would be best if I were to go abroad in the interim; and the very next morning, after sending a message to Janet (with whom, you will remember, I was due to dine that night) telling her I had been called away, I left for Italy.

There, as always, I had a delightful time, marred only by a constant nervous excitement caused by the thought of returning to the scene of action.

I eventually arrived back, four months later, in July, on the day after the opening of the Royal Academy, and I found to my relief that everything had gone according to plan during my absence. The picture of Janet de Pelagia had been painted and hung in the Exhibition, and it was already the subject of much favourable comment both by the critics and the public. I myself refrained from going to see it, but Royden told me on the telephone that there had been several inquiries by persons who wished to buy it, all of wh

om had been informed that it was not for sale. When the show was over, Royden delivered the picture to my house and received his money.

I immediately had it carried up to my workroom, and with mounting excitement I began to examine it closely. The man had painted her standing up in a black evening dress and there was a red-plush sofa in the background. Her left hand was resting on the back of a heavy chair, also of red-plush, and there was a huge crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling.

My God, I thought, what a hideous thing! The portrait itself wasn't so bad. He had caught the woman's expression--the forward drop of the head, the wide blue eyes, the large, ugly-beautiful mouth with the trace of a smile in one corner. He had flattered her, of course. There wasn't a wrinkle on her face or the slightest suggestion of fat under her chin. I bent forward to examine the painting of the dress. Yes here the paint was thicker, much thicker. At this point, unable to wait another moment, I threw off my coat and prepared to go to work.

I should mention here that I am myself an expert cleaner and restorer of paintings. The cleaning, particularly, is a comparatively simple process provided one has patience and a gentle touch, and those professionals who make such a secret of their trade and charge such shocking prices get no business from me. Where my own pictures are concerned I always do the job myself.

I poured out the turpentine and added a few drops of alcohol. I dipped a small wad of cotton wool in the mixture, squeezed it out, and then gently, so very gently, with a circular motion, I began to work upon the black paint of the dress. I could only hope that Royden had allowed each layer to dry thoroughly before applying the next, otherwise the two would merge and the process I had in mind would be impossible. Soon I would know. I was working on one square inch of black dress somewhere around the lady's stomach and I took plenty of time, cautiously testing and teasing the paint, adding a drop or two more of alcohol to my mixture, testing again, adding another drop until finally it was just strong enough to loosen the pigment.

For perhaps a whole hour I worked away on this little square of black, proceeding more and more gently as I came closer to the layer below. Then, a tiny pink spot appeared, and gradually it spread and spread until the whole of my square inch was a clear shining patch of pink. Quickly I neutralized with pure turps.

So far so good. I knew now that the black paint could be removed without disturbing what was underneath. So long as I was patient and industrious I would easily be able to take it all off. Also, I had discovered the right mixture to use and just how hard I could safely rub, so things should go much quicker now.

I must say it was rather an amusing business. I worked first from the mi



ddle of her body downward, and as the lower half of her dress came away bit by bit on to my little wads of cotton, a queer pink undergarment began to reveal itself. I didn't for the life of me know what the thing was called, but it was a formidable apparatus constructed of what appeared to be a strong thick elastic material, and its purpose was apparently to contain and to compress the woman's bulging figure into a neat streamlined shape, giving a quite false impression of slimness. As I travelled lower and lower down, I came upon a striking arrangement of suspenders, also pink, which were attached to this elastic armour and hung downwards four or five inches to grip the tops of the stockings.

Quite fantastic the whole thing seemed to me as I stepped back a pace to survey it. It gave me a strong sense of having somehow been cheated; for had I not, during all these past months, been admiring the sylph-like figure of this lady? She was a faker. No question about it. But do many other females practise this sort of deception, I wondered. I knew, of course, that in the days of stays and corsets it was usual for ladies to strap themselves up; yet for some reason I was under the impression that nowadays all they had to do was diet.

When the whole of the lower half of the dress had come away, I immediately turned my attention to the upper portion, working my way slowly upward from the lady's middle. Here, around the midriff, there was an area of naked flesh; then higher up upon the bosom itself and actually containing it, I came upon a contrivance made of some heavy black material edged with frilly lace. This, I knew very well, was the brassiere--another formidable appliance upheld by an arrangement of black straps as skilfully and scientifically rigged as the supporting cables of a suspension bridge.

Dear me, I thought. One lives and learns.

But now at last the job was finished, and I stepped back again to take a final look at the picture. It was truly an astonishing sight! This woman, Janet de Pelagia, almost life size, standing there in her underwear--in a sort of drawing-room, I suppose it was--with a great chandelier above her head and a red-plush chair by her side; and she herself--this was the most disturbing part of all--looking so completely unconcerned, with the wide placid blue eyes, the faintly smiling, ugly-beautiful mouth. Also I noticed, with something of a shock, that she was exceedingly bow-legged, like a jockey. I tell you frankly, the whole thing embarrassed me. I felt as though I had no right to be in the room, certainly no right to stare. So after a while I went out and shut the door behind me. It seemed like the only decent thing to do.

Now, for the next and final step! And do not imagine simply because I have not mentioned it lately that my thirst for revenge had in any way diminished during the last few months. On the contrary, it had if anything increased; and with the last act about to be performed, I can tell you I found it hard to

to contain myself. That night, for example, I didn't even go to bed.

You see, I couldn't wait to get the invitations out. I sat up all night preparing them and addressing the envelopes. There were twenty-two of them in all, and I wanted each to be a personal note. 'I'm having a little dinner on Friday night, the twenty-second, at eight. I do hope you can come along... I'm so looking forward to seeing you again' The first, the most carefully phrased, was to Janet de Pelagia. In it I regretted not having seen her for so long... I had been abroad... It was time we got together again, etc., etc. The next was to Gladys Ponsonby. Then one to Lady Hermione Girdlestone, another to Princess Bicheno, Mrs Cudbird, Sir Hubert Kaul, Mrs Galbally, Peter Euan Thomas, James Pisker, Sir Eustace Piegrome, Peter van Santen, Elizabeth Moynihan, Lord Mulherrin, Bertram Sturt, Philip Cornelius, Jack Hill, Lady Akeman, Mrs Icely, Humphrey King Howard, Johnny O' Coffey, Mrs Uvary, and the Dowager Countess of Waxworth.

It was a carefully selected list, containing as it did the most distinguished men, the most brilliant and influential women in the top crust of our society.

I was well aware that dinner at my house was regarded as quite an occasion; everybody liked to come. And now, as I watched the point of my pen moving swiftly over the paper, I could almost see the ladies in their pleasure picking up their bedside telephones the morning the invitations arrived, shrill voices calling to shriller voices over the wires... 'Lionel's giving a party...

He's asked you too? My dear, how nice... his food is always so good... and such a lovely man, isn't he though, yes..

Is that really what they would say? It suddenly occurred to me that it might not be like that at all. More like this perhaps: 'I agree, my dear, yes, not a bad old man... but a bit of a bore, don't you think?... What did you say?

¥ Dull? But desperately, my dear. You've hit the nail on the head... did you ever hear what Janet de Pelagia once said about him?... Ah yes, I thought you'd heard that one... screamingly funny, don't you think?... poor Janet... how she stood it as long as she did I don't know.

Anyway, I got the invitations off, and within a couple of days everybody with the exception of Mrs Cudbird and Sir Hubert Kaul, who were away, had accepted with pleasure.

At eight-thirty on the evening of the twenty-second, my large drawing-room was filled with people. They stood about the room, admiring the pictures, drinking their Martinis, talking with loud voices. The women smelled strongly of scent, the men were pink-faced and carefully buttoned up in their dinner-jackets. Janet de Pelagia was wearing the same black dress she had used for the portrait, and every time I caught sight of her, a kind of huge bubble-vision--as in those absurd cartoons--would float up above my head, and in it I would see Janet in her underclothes, the black brassiere, the pink elasti