

The Girl on the Landing

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Extract

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I

The Picture

The last few miles of our journey took us through a region of fields of golden wheat, now being harvested as we drove past. The sky was golden too, ramparts of cumulus catching the late afternoon sun.

As we moved south the colours in the sky changed. Dark grey infused the clouds, and a corona of yellow light formed around their edges. A wind got up, bringing down a first handful of autumn leaves, and I could feel the vibration of distant thunder. That should not have been possible from inside a car, but I felt it all the same: a sense of huge charges of electricity building in the upper atmosphere, an intensity to the light where it gleamed between the darkening clouds. My perceptions had become so much sharper in the last few weeks; it was as if I was rediscovering the world.

I felt certain that a thunderstorm was coming, but it did not come that afternoon: it remained somewhere grumbling in distant valleys. It was late August and we had been invited to stay for a few days in a country house in Ireland. The house was an attractive example of the Georgian period, with large bay windows and walls covered in creeper, now turning from green to red. It stood in parkland of a hundred acres or so, and beyond the pastures lay dark woods on

every side. Behind the house, beyond the walled garden, were the remains of a tower house, roofless and ruined.

We had never been to the house before, and I did not know the owner very well. We were members of the same club in London. Somehow my wife and I had received an invitation to come and play golf on a well-known course not far from the house. Of course I accepted.

I had just finished dressing for dinner. While Elizabeth sat at a table, examining and adjusting her appearance with the help of a cheval mirror, I stood at the window and looked out. The room was at the front of the house and had a view of green pastures and mature trees: antique oaks and limes of great size and girth, their trunks gnarled by age. The leaves on the trees were just beginning to turn and the air was soft, but with that first chill of autumn that comes as the sun sinks lower in the sky. The threatening clouds had now lifted and the pale blue evening sky was streaked with pink, a promise of fine weather for the next day.

It was so quiet. The nearest main road was miles away. The house lay among woods and small rivers that drained into the larger valley where we were playing golf the next day. The fields of wheat that were being harvested as we had turned off the main road were some miles distant and the tractors and the combines we had seen on the way could not be heard. Around the house, the only sound was the cawing of rooks that fluttered into the sky – wheeling in strange patterns – before settling back into the branches again.

Elizabeth completed her preparations and then came and inspected me. With a look of dissatisfaction she adjusted my bow tie and flicked invisible dust from the lapels of my

smoking jacket. We set off down the corridor towards the great staircase that led to the ground floor.

As we walked I looked at the pictures out of idle curiosity. We had been in the house only for an hour or two and I had not had time to examine any of them yet. It is just a habit of mine: I know nothing about pictures, but I gaze at them all the same. They are windows into other worlds: if I stand in front of a seascape of a breezy foreshore, I can almost feel the wind on my face, the faint pinpricks of spray on the moving air. This house was full of pictures: scarcely an inch of wall space remained uncovered.

There was the usual collection of brown paintings, badly in need of cleaning or restoration; landscapes that suggested classical antiquity; one or two Venetian scenes; farther on, a few portraits of the owner's ancestors, gloomy-looking men in black coats or frowning females clad in dresses of dark stuff. Large canvasses filled the spaces between elderly glass-fronted display cabinets containing dusty Dresden shepherdesses, but slightly lower down there was a smaller picture that caught my attention.

The painting was of an interior that showed a shadowed landing. On one side of the landing was an old linen press; its drawers and doors were clearly drawn. On the other side, the only object of note was a white marble statue of an angel, mounted on a column of black basalt. The angel's wings were unfurled, as if it had just alighted in that position. Its chin was poised upon the palm of its hand, and one elbow was resting on its knee. The whole aspect of the angel was curious: it might have been weeping, or it might have been watchful, admonitory.

The landing ended in an archway that led to another landing, the vaguely sketched outlines of which receded into

the hinterland of the picture. This second landing was bathed in a silvery light, as if pictured by moonlight. If there were windows, the artist had not bothered to define them. One simply had an impression of a transition from darkness into light. Here, at this junction, was a female figure clad in a green dress. Whether it was a girl, or a woman, was hard to say. The artist may perhaps have been idle, or maybe it was a question of technique. The foreground of the picture was drawn with great precision and attention to detail: the bare floorboards of the landing denoting austerity, if not actual hard times; the faintly asymmetric linen chest suggesting its origins in the best sort of domestic cabinetmaking. The farther into the background the artist went, however, the less he appeared to care about detail. The female figure was merely sketched in and she was dark, so dark one could make out only the merest suggestion of a face, but she was surrounded by a nimbus of light. A mass of sombre colour behind her hinted at a large vase with a fan of branches in it. As I looked into the picture I could imagine the rustling of silk as the girl continued her walk along the landing towards the vantage point of the artist.

‘Darling, are you coming?’ asked Elizabeth, in the exasperated tone of someone who had taken nearly an hour to get changed for dinner while I had stood looking out of the window. She was waiting for me at the top of the staircase, reluctant to go down and meet these people we hardly knew without me beside her.

‘Just a minute,’ I replied. ‘There’s rather an odd picture here.’

There was a faint snort in reply, but she made no attempt to come and look, merely tapping her foot as she stood and waited.

I decided the figure was a girl, rather than a woman: there was something in the slim erectness of her posture that suggested a person not yet challenged by age or child-bearing; an undefeated attitude, I thought. Was she looking at the angel? The juxtaposition of the two figures was curious, even unsettling.

I decided to come back and take a look before breakfast the next morning, when maybe the light in the corridor would be stronger.

I straightened up and went to join my wife. We descended the stairs together in sedate silence.

Dinner was no worse than any other occasion when people who are more or less strangers meet for the first time. The usual game of who knew whom was played, quite successfully. The food and wine were good. The owner of the house was reserved, but at the same time had a natural courtesy. I decided I liked him; I had not seen enough of him on the occasions we had met before to form any clear opinion. Elizabeth and his wife got on all right, and the other couple were relaxed and talkative.

After dinner the owner took me out on to the gravel at the front of the house so that we could smoke our cigars without censure from our wives. The two of us stood together, puffing away in easy silence for most of the time. I complimented the owner on dinner, and on the wines, and received only the briefest of replies. Then I asked, 'Have your family always lived here?'

This time my companion replied with some animation.

'We have lived here for quite a while, in that old tower house, you know, and then we built this place when things appeared to be settling down. The old tower house was

built in 1560, and the new house was built in 1780, but the tower has rather fallen down, as you may have noticed. There has been a dwelling of some sort on the land for a lot longer than even the old house. There is an ancient burial mound in the woods.'

'How fascinating . . . and were you brought up here?'

'Not at all. I inherited quite by chance. It should have gone to a cousin, but he died in a car accident, and so the house came to me. We've only lived here for ten years. But you've brought a dog with you?'

This non sequitur was caused by a sudden movement in the back of my car, as my old black Labrador woke up and looked out to see whether I was near by.

'Yes. He loves coming everywhere with us. He's too old to race around now, but he's never happier than when he sits by the side of a river or follows me around on a golf course, when he's allowed to.'

'I quite agree,' said the owner, 'I always take one of our spaniels golfing or fishing with me. They're such good company, aren't they? But don't leave him outside. There's a clear sky and it will be a chilly night. He'll be very stiff in the morning. Take him up to your bedroom if you like. I'm sure he'll be much happier there. We've a spare dog basket we can lend you. Dogs rule this house, not people. He's very welcome inside.'

After demurring for some time I finally agreed to his suggestion, and later, when the other couple had left and we were going to bed, I let Rupert out of the back of my old Range Rover, and walked him around the gravel a couple of times, then took him indoors. He sniffed the air as he entered the house, and paused for a second. But the owner's spaniels had been shut up in the kitchen for the

night, and so Rupert eventually followed me up the great staircase. I turned right towards our bedroom, with Rupert padding at my heels. Then a strange thing happened. He froze. I turned to see why he was not beside me and saw that he was half crouching, as if threatened. His hackles were up, and a low, rumbling growl came from deep within him.

‘Come on, Rupert,’ I said. Some new smell had upset him, I supposed. It was not surprising in a house full of strange dogs. But Rupert would not come on.

Elizabeth appeared at the bedroom door, now clad in her silk dressing gown, and when she saw what the problem was, she came and spoke gently to Rupert. It made no difference. He would not move an inch.

Puzzled, I gave up. If he was not going to be happy in the house there seemed little point in dragging him into our bedroom. I took him back to the car and he scrambled in, his tail thumping once or twice as if to reassure me that he would be much better off out here.

At last I went to bed.

The next day was spent golfing. I played a very moderate game as my concentration had gone, and I felt I was not living up to my host’s expectations. Nevertheless, it was a beautiful soft day, and the outing was generally agreed to have been a success. There was some teasing about my poor form, which I took with a restrained smile, and I had to admit it was deserved. My mind had been wandering all day, as if new pathways were opening up inside my head. But outwardly I smiled, and laughed at the jokes.

It was late afternoon when we arrived back at the house, and tea was brought to the drawing room, where we were

all sitting. We were chatting about the day when a thought struck me and I stood up. ‘Do you mind if I go upstairs while it’s still light? I want to get a better look at that picture of the girl on the landing. I couldn’t make it out very well last night.’

The owner and his wife looked blank.

‘I’m not sure which picture you mean,’ he said, after a moment.

‘You know, the one with the girl standing looking at the marble angel. It’s hung quite low down.’

‘Oh, that one,’ said the owner’s wife. ‘It’s a funny little picture. We got it with the house. I keep meaning to put something a bit more cheerful there. But there’s no girl in it. It’s just a rather badly done interior, as far as I remember.’

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘I thought there was. I’d better go and have another look.’

I went upstairs, followed by the owner and Elizabeth. We bent and examined the picture. Now, in the light of day, I could see they were right. There was no human figure in the picture, only a mass of something – was it a shadow? a stain? a blemish in the canvas? – at the juncture of the two landings, where last night I had seen, or imagined, a girl standing. That was what had tricked my eye. As I straightened up I saw recent scratch marks in the varnish of the floorboards of the corridor. Beside them lay a few leaves from a rowan tree that must have blown in from somewhere. It looked as if Rupert had, quite literally, dug his toes in when he stopped here last night. Something had disturbed him.

That visit to Ireland was a while ago. I still remember the melancholy woods around the house, the flocks of rooks

fluttering among the trees, or wheeling in great arcs above the dewy pasture of the park. I can remember how I lay awake that night, unable for some reason to sleep, listening to the harsh screeching of an owl, perhaps in the ruined tower. A wind got up and the house creaked, as old houses do, and I imagined, half awake and half asleep, that people were passing up and down the corridor outside. I looked at my bedside travel clock and saw that it was two in the morning. I willed myself to ignore the sounds of the strange house. I fell into uneasy dreams, while Elizabeth breathed steadily beside me, sound asleep. Just before dawn I sank into a deeper slumber, and awoke later than I had intended. We had to rush to catch the ferry back to England.