The Portrait

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Well, well, well. Come in, my dear fellow. Let me look at you. But first, an embrace; it is not often you see an old friend for the first time in nearly four years. You've not changed a bit. Well, of *course* I'm lying. The eyes are that little bit more lined, the skin has lost some of its texture, the hair is a touch more grey. We are both past our best. But at least you're still slim, to the point of emaciation. How you can eat so much to so little effect never ceases to astonish. The differences between us grow year by year, as you undoubtedly noticed the moment you saw me.

I must confess I was disturbed when I received your pro-

posal last month. I thought, to begin with, that it was a bad idea. I could hardly believe you were prepared to travel all this way just to see me. Hence my cautious reply, in case you were making sly fun of me. My years of exile have made me sensitive, as you will no doubt discover. But here you are, a figure from history itself—my history, at least, as I suppose you are still very much in the centre of things back in London.

A glass of wine to toast your arrival. The pick of the Luberon. A particularly good year, 1912, as I am sure you will agree, especially when carefully aged for nearly nine months. I joke, of course. I like the stuff, but hardly expect your sophisticated palate to be equally enthusiastic. It is all sun and earth; no artifice in its production whatsoever. Dark, strong and somewhat violent—a little like the people who make it, in fact. I've grown used to the taste; it makes a change from the beer and cider that are the staples hereabouts, and fine vintages would be wasted on me, even if you could get them. I have a barrel brought over on the boat every month or so and drink it until it turns to vinegar. Already has, you think? No; it's meant to be like that—or if it isn't, few on this island know any better. This is the wine of the peasantry, the fuel of France. Drink it and you become like them. Don't say you haven't been warned.

Sit down, then. I know, not comfortable, but it is the cleanest and best chair I have. Besides, it will suit my purpose admirably, as you will see. I have been made nervous, even irritated, by your sudden arrival on my little island. Do you know how long it is since I've had a commission to paint a portrait? Extraordinary, considering my vogue, but I gave all that up when I gave up England. And now you want to take me into my past. So be it; you will have to endure the consequences of your own folly.

Your timing is as good as ever, though. A few months ago I would have rejected the idea out of hand, but now I found the invitation tickling. Why not, I thought? Let's see what we can do here. It is time to discover whether I can ever go back to England by exploring why I left in the first place. And who better to help the enquiry than the man who is the foremost critic in the land, whose opinion has the weight of the divine behind it?

Another little joke. But it is an opportunity to renew the battle and fight it to a conclusion. Who will emerge triumphant from this encounter of ours, do you think? The painter or the sitter? Will it be "portrait of a gentleman by Henry Morris MacAlpine," or "portrait of William Nasmyth, by anon." The National Gallery, or the National Por-

trait Gallery? We shall see. It will be your fame against my abilities, and the result won't be in until long after we're both dead. I won't trick you, I promise. I won't sign the picture and forget to put your name on it. We will have an equal chance to see whom posterity decides to favour.

Do look around the room. I'll be able to study your face in different lights. Not much to see, though; I've cast the material world aside and live as simply as the fishermen of this island. I have some books, some clothes, my paints and a few pots and pans. Not that I cook much; there is a perfectly good bar in the village, and the widow who keeps it will prepare a meal for me whenever I like, which is most of the time. Don't look like that; she's fat, old and has a fearsome temper. You will stay there, if you insist on going ahead with this project. As you see, I am hardly in a position to offer you hospitality and wouldn't anyway. I have grown used to solitude, and now prefer it. I have only the one truckle bed, which you would find as uncomfortable as sleeping on the floor. Madame Le Gurun's accommodation will not be much better, but you will get a true taste of deep France to shock your delicate sensibilities. This is not Paris, nor Deauville nor yet Pau, I warn you.

I can see on your face that you are surprised, even a little disoriented by all this. What did you have in your mind, as

you travelled to see me? A lovely *maison de maître*, nestling in the hills, at least. Servants, certainly. People of some sort—a *maire*, an *avocat*, a doctor to invite me to dinner. Surely your old friend would insist on some sort of society in which to bathe his ego, however provincial it might be? Did you think this poor benighted island was like Belle-Ile over there, that poets and playwrights came in the summer to preen themselves on my terrace? Could the man you knew in London exist without being surrounded by company?

And what do you find? Nothing. A dingy, smoke-filled house with the roof coming off—perfectly serviceable, though, I assure you. Scarcely any furniture. A painter dressed in rags, looking hardly better than a tramp, living like some hermit on a windswept, bare island inhabited only by a few hundred Breton fishermen and their families. I mean, how extreme!

You're right, of course, but what would be pretentious in Chelsea is perfectly acceptable here. What difference would it make how I dressed? No one ever sees me, except when I beg passage to go to Quiberon, and then I dress as fine as any country lawyer. I trim my beard—which you must admit is very fine and distracts attention from the ever-thinner hair on my head. And I struggle into my old suit with much wheezing; I have put on weight in the past few years as you

see, and my clothes fit only with a protest. Still, I am elegant in comparison to most people in these parts, and with a straw hat on my head at its old jaunty angle, and with the walking stick that you gave me as a present, I believe I still cut a grand enough figure. I may be eccentric, but I do not want a reputation for such; it is the one way of attracting attention which I have always disdained. I need only one bed, one chair, one table, so that is all I have. The walls are bare; look out of the window and you have a finer sight than any painter has ever placed on a piece of canvas. And constantly changing, as well. The intensity and variety of the sea is extraordinary; there is no chance of ever getting bored with it, and I find even the greatest painting wearies me sooner or later. As for my own works, I know perfectly well what they look like, each and every one. I don't need to hang them up and look at them, and don't need anyone else to look, either.

Stop! Don't move! That will do; I want you to be comfortable, as I intend to keep you here for some time. I am out of practise, remember, and creaking bones go slower than well-exercised ones. I have mainly spent my time painting landscapes, and hills neither move nor talk back to you. Nor do they try to sneak into an elegant posture, or have a supercilious look on their faces. Remove both, if you please. I intend

to paint you with grandeur, not as some simpering aesthete. A smirk is of its time. Solemnity is for eternity.

Let me explain my thinking. What I have decided to do—and I am not interested in your opinion on the matter—is a portrait in which a variation in light will show up different aspects of your character. Think of Monet. No, I haven't changed my mind; I still think he was not a good painter. But undoubtedly a great one, and as you know, I have never minded leaning on the great. So I'll need you morning, afternoon and evening, depending on where I am in my work. For an ordinary portrait, one glance is enough; for most sitters it is more than enough. A man of complexity requires more, and a poor painter like me needs all the help he can get. Perhaps Titian could communicate all levels at once, but he was a genius and I—as you once pointed out—am not. A hurtful comment, you know, until I recognised its truth. I discovered early on that I could always forgive you anything, as long as you told the truth. Then I learnt how to use that knowledge, and bend my skills to my limitations, and exceed both. Intelligence and craft, sometimes, can be an effective substitute for native ability.

I intend to cheat, mind you; my account of you is partly finished already. You remember, no doubt? The portrait I be-

gan in Hampshire in 1906? I brought it with me; my departure was not as sudden as it seemed. I gave myself more than enough time to pack and take with me the things I considered important. For some reason, your face was amongst all the other debris I felt I could not do without, even though it had been lying in my studio unfinished for three years. Every now and then, I take it out and look at it. About a year ago I finally got around to completing it, the first panel: *The Critic As He Was;* now I will begin on *The Critic As He Is.* One day, perhaps, *As He Will Be.* Past, present and future, all in one gorgeous trilogy.

So we will revisit Van Dyck together, you and I. You know what I mean, of course; the triple portrait of Charles I. An allusion, if you like, to your renowned connoisseurship. But not a pastiche; those pictures have the two outer pictures looking inwards, the king regards nothing but himself. The middle portrait stares out, calm and arrogant, not caring what the world sees or thinks. That would never do for a man like yourself. The critic must look outwards, all the time. Over your shoulder even, lest you miss some new fashion sneaking up from behind.

Do you remember when we saw that picture together? You took me along as part of my London education. I was in awe of you, even though I was already in my fumbling way

a better painter than you could ever dream of becoming. But you had vast knowledge and a boundless self-confidence, and I wanted that from you, wanted to see how you did it. So I watched; you taught, and my dependency grew still greater. I didn't realise then that it was not something that could be mimicked. That assurance had deep roots that I could never grow for myself. That ability of yours never to doubt, never to hesitate about the correctness of your opinions, was part of your character, not mine.

Not mere arrogance, either. You had the right to your confidence, just as those colonial governors and members of Parliament have a right to their authority. You had spent years studying these pictures, while I merely had worked at painting some myself; immersed yourself in everything from Vasari to Morelli, while I was labouring away in a Glasgow drawing shop; travelled Europe from Hamburg to Naples before I had even left Scotland.

And I thought I could have all that merely by being around you for a few months. You never told me it was impossible. You never warned me and said, "I went to Winchester and Cambridge; I have known artists and writers, lords and ladies, all my life. I know Italy and France as well as I know my own country. You are a poor Scottish boy of no education and no connections, who has seen nothing but what I

have shown you. We see and understand things differently, and always will. Find your own way, or you will only ever be ridiculous." Had you said that, I would not have believed you—at least not then. But it would have been the truth; you would have done your duty.

What is that you have so furtively popped into your mouth? A pill? Medicine? Are you ill? Let me see what you have in that bag. Goodness, even your maladies are fashionable! A weakness in the heart, I suppose. Do you need to lie down occasionally, become soporific and frail without these things? Have the vapours on a settee? Strange how this age has turned weakness into something attractive and interesting, decided that frailty and artistic judgement are two sides of the same thing. Like Beardsley and his tuberculosis, spluttering his contamination all over people at the dinner table. Would he have been taken so seriously had he been in robust good health and gone swimming in the ocean in December? I think not, somehow. Anyway, let me know if you feel like slipping off your chair into a stupor. If you are going to spoil the pose I would like a little advance warning.

By all means, pour a glass of water and eat your little pills. It is the wrong time of day for serious work in any case. Had you arrived on time, then maybe something might have been done today. But when were you ever on time? Making

others wait is part of your manner. I didn't get out of bed until more than an hour after you were due. You weren't going to have me hanging around, working myself up into a bad mood on our first day. And I shall give Madame Le Gurun strict instructions that you are to be woken up at daybreak, and pushed out the door by six. For her, as for most of the people hereabouts, that is a long and decadent lie-in. The morning light is what I want for you, to start with. Clear and shadowless, with the freshness of dawn. Nothing is hidden, and the slight chill you get at this time of year stimulates the senses wonderfully. You will have the delight of walking across the island every morning at dawn, seeing the sea in its infinite variety. Then, later on, I think the evening, with long shadows accentuating that long nose of yours, the watchful look of slight malevolence you have sometimes, when you are briefly unaware that anyone is looking at you.

I have seen it many times. I particularly remember the first occasion. Do you want to hear? Why not? You have nothing better to do, after all, and although I allow myself to talk as much as I like while I work, it is not something I encourage in my sitters. It is, after all, how I created my reputation. Ah! A smile, if only a slight one. Please don't. Solemn, remember. What was the woman's name? Not that it matters. She'd married way above herself and was headachingly nervous.

She talked incessantly in a high, squeaky twitter, and eventually I had to finish quickly to avoid strangling her. I exhibited the portrait at the New English exhibition of 1903 with one of those silly academic titles. *Lost for Words,* I called it. My first success as a man of wit. It gained me some standing and reputation, and all for the small cost of humiliating a perfectly decent woman. I never apologised, not even when I came to regret it.

But that look of yours, the one I intend to go a-hunting for, that *particular* look I first noticed at Julien's *académie de peinture.* Hateful place; I learned nothing there at all, but it was good for the reputation, and I was very mindful of that. What painter could be taken seriously in London without having studied in Paris? So off we all trooped, me and Rothenstein and McAvoy and Connard and all the other hopefuls, and sat around and drew and painted and argued and damned all others for their mediocrity. Well, it was fun to live in poverty and be perpetually borrowing money off each other, and to dream of conquering the world, of striding into the new century as conquerors claiming our birthright. We came back to London so full of ourselves, with such hopes! Maybe that was the point of it. But I certainly didn't learn to paint there. Just to work quickly in a dark and smoky room with an incessant din all around me. I

learned to live in a crowd and maintain my sense of self. I learned that I'd have to be detached if I was ever to achieve anything at all. And I learned how cruel is the world of art; how much like a jungle, where only the most powerful survive. A harsh and surprising lesson, as I had been used to the gentler atmosphere of drunken working men in Glasgow, whose only violence is to beat each other senseless on a Saturday night.

I remember when Evelyn first joined us in 1898, after I'd been there for two years and was already beginning to think of going to see whether I would survive in the great cauldron of the London painting world. She didn't come for the life class, of course; women weren't allowed into that. For one of the general lessons in perspective, an arrangement of dying flowers in a vase, an old jar, a hammer, all arranged quite indecorously. Curious spectacle, all those budding young revolutionaries, peering earnestly at that homely arrangement like a bunch of polite schoolboys. And then this girl comes in, and everyone sniggers. She was so young, so innocent-looking and so—prim. The sort who lives with her mother, drinks sherry once a month and is in bed by half past nine every night. Not the sort of woman you would want as a subject for a painting, unless you have a yen to depict the frail and delicate; although once I looked closer I

thought maybe you could do something interesting with those pale cheeks, the thin hair pulled tightly into an unflattering bun at the nape of the neck, the slightly hunched pose, as if she were trying to hide her small breasts, pretend they were not there. She looks around, arranges herself, says good morning in a quiet, nervous voice, then begins. We all crowd round after a bit, to see the polite bit of feminine nonsense she had produced, and I saw that expression on your face.

You had come to take me to dinner, and were waiting with unaccustomed patience for me to clean myself up enough to look respectable. Normally it was the other way round, with me waiting like a young girl for her first beau. I'd only known you for a month or so then, and was already captivated. A chance, overheard remark in a museum, and you came up to me and invited me for a drink. The Café de l'Opéra! Champagne! Brilliant conversation, so worldly and knowing. You were already known, and had started writing reviews of Paris exhibitions for the newspapers in London. Were the editor of an advanced journal with no circulation, someone who turned up at parties and dinners. Had a reputation for—something, although no-one really knew what. Yet you pursued me, initiated the friendship and cultivated it. You chose me to be your friend! You singled me out, paid

attention to me, began my education. I was twenty-seven, but so inexperienced of this new world I wished to enter I'm sure I seemed much younger. You were near thirty already, but almost jaded from having seen so much.

I think the others laughed at me behind my back, but I didn't care. I wore my adoration, my reverence, like a badge of pride. "William says . . ." "William thinks . . ." "William and I . . ." Heavens, but I must have been ridiculous. You encouraged it, flattered and cajoled. "Don't worry about the others. An artist like yourself . . ." "You have something special; real ability . . ." All those phrases; I lapped them up, wanted more, wanted you to say them again and again. It was like bathing in milk. And I didn't realise how much I filled a need in you: everything was fresh for me; you had seen everything before, many times over. With me in tow you could catch some of the excitement of discovery and feel the joy of novelty once more. I think it is why you so earnestly advocate the new in art. You are constantly in search of something to excite you and stir an enthusiasm that a too-fortunate education has snatched from your grasp.

No-one had ever taken me seriously before. You were the first not to regard me as skilled only in self-deception. You patronised me, of course, but then you patronised everyone. But even I realised that you liked to be around when I saw

something for the first time, discovered a painter I had never heard of, gazed with wonder on a masterpiece you had known all your life. You could tell me everything about the artist, dissect his skill and turn his genius into words. But you couldn't be frozen in amazement, couldn't tremble with emotion. I provided that for you, and in return you gave me an education. Until you came along, I was sustained only by a deep-seated Scottish doggedness, but I knew already it wasn't going to be enough. I loved you for that, always will. Because you were right, after all: I am a good artist.

I threw myself into my work under your tutelage, labouring all hours of the day and night to make myself better, laying my improvements before you like a faithful dog coming back to his master with a stick. And I did get better, improved in ways I scarcely thought possible; I learned to take risks, not to be safe and hide behind my skill. Oh, bliss it was! I still look back on those evenings we spent together as the happiest part of my life, and I wanted it to go on forever. I didn't want to get to know you any better; didn't want to think about the shadows and the subtleties. But innocence is only pleasurable because it is transient.

How is it that expressions change? I have spent years looking at people's faces, and it is still a mystery to me. A minus-

cule, immeasurable movement of an eyebrow in relation to the eye and nose; a scarcely discernible tightening or loosening of the muscles in cheek and neck; the barest tremor on the lips; a shine in the eyes. But we know the eyes do not change; the most significant manifestation of emotion is pure illusion. And this fractional shifting is all that distinguishes contempt from respect, love from anger. Some people are crude; their faces can be read by anyone. Some are more subtle, and only those close to them can read the face correctly. Some are incomprehensible even to themselves.

It has taken me years to unpick the expression on your face when you looked at Evelyn's work that day in the atelier. I sometimes think my entire career, my life, even, could be cast as the quest to decipher that look, to peel away layer after layer, to plunge down into your mind and piece together the fragmentary emotions and responses that I saw but could not understand. I managed it eventually; I will tell you how soon enough.

So the expression was obscure, but the response was not. That was as clear as a bell. A polite dismissal. Not even contempt. It carried weight, I followed you, but not so far as to make some comment; even then I could see something of

myself in her. And I was not comfortable. Because my own immediate reaction had been different—the brief start that comes into the mind when faced with something unexpected and surprising. I could have dismissed that easily, of course; but it was echoed by the momentary hesitation I noticed in you; a sliver of time between your looking and your response.

That's what I want in this picture, the one I have been carefully sketching out all this while. I want that look, that penetration. I want that ability to see reflected back on the viewer, want the person looking at this portrait to think that it is he who is being assessed, not the other way round. And unless you manage to give it to me, old friend, I'll have to try and conjure it up from my memory. No-one will understand but me, of course; it may be that it will all go down as merely a piece of bad painting, or be overlooked entirely. It doesn't matter; this is not just a public portrait. It is also a private matter, between you and me. So that you understand my understanding, if you follow me.

You see, the problem I have at the moment is that you have grown just a touch sleek in the last few years. I hadn't expected that before you arrived, so I am having to rethink my approach. You've become a bit *too* self-confident, somewhat priggish. All those years back, there was a faint anxiety to your features. It made you more human, more complex at

the same time that it made you more difficult and—let us not beat about the bush—more prickly. Your snobbishness, your arrogance, your ambition were all nearer the surface then, and even though they are not normally appealing qualities, they made you a more attractive person, and certainly an easier one to paint. Now years of success have worn all that away; I see none of it any more. But it is still there, somewhere, and I intend to bring it out. I know you haven't really changed.

At the moment you look merely sardonic, detached. No good at all. You've ruined my morning. We will stop here. No, I've no idea what you should do for the rest of the day; that's your problem. I suggest a walk. You have too much of the urban about you; it makes you pale and rather lifeless—desiccated, even. Fresh air and exercise would be very much better for you than those nasty little pills. Besides, there are some things to see around here if you look; they are careless of their history in these parts and leave it lying around in the most surprising places. I like that tendency in them; they are concerned with the present, and feel no need to preserve and catalogue every last stone of their past. They have been futurists for generations. The avant-garde can tell them nothing they do not already know.

I admit Houat is not much to look at, at first sight; it

doesn't yield up its charms easily. There's nothing for a man schooled in Gainsborough, who knows of the sublime beauty of the Alpine landscape, the wooded gentleness of Suffolk, or expects his Campagna to be peopled with besporting nymphs and shepherds. There are no mountains, no woods. Scarcely even any trees. You have to look to see the clumps of wild carnations, the yellow of the broom, or the jasmine. The variety of grasses, each with a subtly different colour. All these things need to be studied, but above all you have to study the sea, which is the alpha and omega of this place, its definition and cause. The colours, the tones, the shapes of the sea in its different guises are all the scenery you need; it is an endless show, and can conjure up every emotion and mood. I recommend a closer look; walk along Treac'h er Goured—the whole island, after all, is only a couple of miles long; even you could manage it—and find the holy fountain. Sit by it while you smell the wind and feel the sun. Stay long enough and you will begin to see what I mean, perhaps. Go to the church in the village, take a walk along the beach, the cliffs, and look out over the sea. Consider the fort overlooking the island, the stonework of the quay. There are menhirs and dolmens here, although such echoes of a pagan past are supposed to have been destroyed.

What more could any reasonable man want? There is enough for a lifetime of contemplation. Tell me what you think tomorrow.

And while you are at it, I will cast an eye over my morning's labour and, no doubt, find it wanting. At the moment, though, I'm not displeased with my efforts. I've caught that way your chin rises above the horizontal and gives you the air of aloofness and superiority you use so well. But not too much; don't worry. I haven't yet descended into caricature. And no, you can't see it. This isn't a collaboration. I paint; you sit. When you are in that chair, you are stripped of your expertise, of your taste and discernment. Your opinion is of no more value to me than that of the old peasant I sketched last month. You are defenceless until I am finished.

Don't look petulant; it is only a passing torment you have to endure. Painters have to live with the opinions of others forever, and so we try to ignore them as much as possible, like these islanders who do not notice the stone memorials to the hardships they have witnessed. Think of the cruelties you have inflicted on others with your pen—for the most part justified I am sure, but no less hurtful for that—and consider how petty my revenge will be. Besides, I have to be true to what I see; I cannot be too harsh on you when I trace the

line of that chin. I remember too well how it made me laugh, how I flung myself into agreement with its disdainful movements.

Shut the door when you go out. The wind is getting up and I don't want my papers blowing about.

