The Master
Colm Toibin

Chapter 1

January 1895

Sometimes in the night he dreamed about the dead - familiar faces and the others, half-forgotten ones fleetingly summoned up. Now as he woke, it was, he imagined, an hour or more before the dawn; there would be no sound or movement for several hours. He touched the muscles on his neck which had become stiff; to his fingers they seemed unyielding and solid but not painful. As he moved his head, he could hear the muscles creaking. I am like an old door, he said to himself.

It was imperative, he knew, that he go back to sleep. He could not lie awake during these hours. He wanted to sleep, enter a lovely blackness, a dark, but not too dark, resting place, unhaunted, unpeopled, with no flickering presences.

When he woke again, he was agitated and unsure where he was. He often woke like this, disturbed, only half remembering the dream and desperate for the day to begin. Sometimes when he dozed, he would bask in the hazy, soft light of Bellosguardo in the early spring, the distances all misty, feeling the sheer pleasure of sunlight on his face, sitting in a chair, close to the wall of the old house with the smell of wisteria and early roses and jasmine. He would hope when he woke that the day would be like the dream, that traces of the ease and the colour and the light would linger at the edge of things until night fell again.

But this dream was different. It was dark or darkening somewhere, it was a city, an old place in Italy like Orvieto or Siena, but nowhere exact, a dream-city with narrow streets, and he was hurrying; he was uncertain now whether he was alone or with somebody, but he was hurrying and there were students walking slowly up the hill too, past lighted shops and cafes and restaurants, and he was eager to get by them, finding ways to pass them. No matter how hard he tried to remember, he was still not sure if he had a companion; perhaps he did, or perhaps it was merely someone who walked behind him. He could not recall much about this shadowy, intermittent presence, but for some of the time there seemed to be a person or a voice close to him who understood better than he did the urgency, the need to hurry, and who insisted under his breath in mutterings and mumbles, cajoled him to walk faster, edge the students out of his path.

Why did he dream this? At each long and dimly-lit entrance to a square, he recalled, he was tempted to leave the bustling street, but he was urged to carry on. Was his ghostly companion telling him to carry on? Finally, he walked slowly into a vast Italian space, with towers and castellated roofs, and a sky the colour of dark blue ink, smooth and consistent. He stood there and watched as though it were framed, taking in the symmetry and texture. This time - and he shivered when he recalled the scene - there were figures in the centre with their backs to him, figures

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forming a circle, but he could see none of their faces. He was ready to walk towards them when the figures with their backs to him turned. One of them was his mother towards the end of her life, his mother when he had last seen her. Near her among the other women stood his aunt Kate. Both of them were more than ten years dead; they were smiling at him and moving slowly towards him. Their faces were lit like faces in a painting. The word that came to him, he was sure that he had dreamt the word as much as the scene, was the word 'beseeching'. They were imploring him or somebody, asking, yearning, and then putting their hands out in front of them in supplication, and as they moved towards him he woke in cold fright, and he wished that they could have spoken, or that he could have offered the two people whom he had loved most in his life some consolation. What came over him in the aftertaste of the dream was a wearying, gnawing sadness and, since he knew that he must not go back to sleep, an overwhelming urge to start writing, anything to numb himself, distract himself, from the vision of these two women who were lost to him.

He covered his face for a moment when he remembered one second in the dream which had caused him to wake abruptly. He would have given anything now to forget it, to prevent it from following him into the day: in that square he had locked eyes with his mother, and her gaze was full of panic, her mouth ready to cry out. She fiercely wanted something beyond her reach, which she could not obtain, and he could not help her.

In the days coming up to the New Year he had refused all invitations. He wrote to Lady Wolseley that he sat all day at rehearsals in the company of several fat women who made the costumes. He was uneasy and anxious, often agitated, but sometimes, too, he was involved in the action on the stage as though it were all new to him, and he was moved by it. He asked Lady Wolseley and her husband to unite in prayers for him on the opening night of his play, not far away now.

In the evening he could do nothing, and his sleep was fitful. He saw nobody except his servants, and they knew not to speak to him or trouble him beyond what was entirely necessary.

His play 'Guy Domville', the story of a rich Catholic heir who must choose whether to carry on the family line or join a monastery, would open on January 5. All the invitations to the opening night had gone out and he had already received many replies of acceptance and thanks. Alexander, the producer and lead actor, had a following among theatre-goers, and the costumes - the play was set in the eighteenth century - were sumptuous. Yet, despite his new enjoyment of the society of actors and the glitter and the daily small changes and improvments in the production, he was, he said, not made for the theatre. He sighed as he sat at his desk. He wished it were an ordinary day and he could read over yesterday's sentences, spend a slow morning making corrections, and then starting out once more, filling the afternoon with ordinary work. And yet he knew that his mood could change as quickly as the light in the room could darken, and he easily could feel only happiness at his life in

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the theatre and begin again to hate the company of his blank pages. Middle age, he thought, had made him fickle.

His visitor had arrived promptly at eleven o'clock. He could not have refused to see her; her letter had been carefully insistent. Soon she would be leaving Paris for good, she said, and this would be her last visit to London. There was something oddly final and resigned in her tone, a tone so alien to her general spirit that he was quickly alerted to the seriousness of her situation. He had not seen her for more than twenty years, but over these years he had received some letters from her and news from others about her. That morning, however, still haunted by his dream, and so full of concern about his play, he saw her as merely a name in his diary, stirring an old memory sharp in its outlines and faded in its detail.

When she came into the room, her old face smiling warmly, her large-boned frame moving slowly and deliberately, her greeting so cheerful, open and affectionate, and her voice so beautiful and soft, almost whispering, it was easy to put aside his worries about his play and the time he was wasting by not being in the theatre. He had forgotten how much he liked her and how easy it was to be taken instantly back to those days when he was in his twenties and lingered as much as he could in the company of French and Russian writers in Paris.

Somehow, in the years that followed, the shadowy presences interested him as much as the famous ones, the figures who had not become known, who had failed, or who had never planned to flourish. His visitor had been married to the Prince Oblisky. The Prince had a reputation for being stern and distant; the fate of Russia and his purposeful exile concerned him more than the evening's amusement and the glamorous company who stood around. The Princess was Russian too, but she had lived most of her life in France. Around her and her husband there were always hints and rumours and suggestions. It was part of the time and the place, he thought. Everyone he knew carried with them the aura of another life which was half secret and half open, to be known about but not mentioned. In those years, you searched each face for what it might unwittingly disclose and you listened carefully for nuances and clues. New York and Boston had not been like that, and in London, when he finally came to live there, people allowed themselves to believe that you had no hidden and secret self unless you emphatically declared to the contrary.

He remembered the shock when he first came to know Paris, the culture of easy duplicity, the sense he got of these men and women, watched over by the novelists, casually witholding what mattered to them most.

He had never loved the intrigue. Yet he liked knowing secrets, because not to know was to miss almost everything. He himself learned never to disclose anything, and never even to acknowledge the moment when some new information was imparted, to act as though a mere pleasantry had been exchanged. The men and women in the salons of literary Paris moved like players in a game of knowing and not knowing, pretence and disguise. He had learned everything from them.

He found the Princess a seat, brought her extra cushions, and then offered her a different chair, or indeed a chaise-longue which might be more comfortable.

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'At my age,' she smiled at him, 'nothing is comfortable.'

He stopped moving about the room and turned to look at her. He had learned that when he quietly fixed his calm grey eyes on somebody they too became calm; they realised, or so he thought, that what they said next should be serious in some way, that the time for the casual play of half-talk had come to an end.

'I have to go back to Russia,' she said in slow, carefully-pronounced French. 'That is what I have to do. When I say go back, I talk as though I have been there before, and yes I have, but not in any way that means anything to me. I have no desire to see Russia again, but he insists that I stay there, that I leave France for good.'

As she spoke she smiled, as she had always done, but now there was anguish and a sort of puzzlement in her face. She had brought the past into the room with her, and for him now, in these years after the death of his parents and his sister, any reminder of a time that was over brought with it a terrible and heavy melancholy. Time would not relent, and when he was young, he had never imagined the pain that loss would bring, pain that only work and sleep could keep at bay now.

Her soft voice and her easy manners made it clear that she had not changed. Her husband was known to treat her badly. He had problems with estates. She began to talk now about some remote estate to which she was going to be banished.

The January light was liquid and silky in the room. He sat and listened. He knew that the Prince Oblisky had left the son by his first marriage in Russia, and had gruffly spent his life in Paris. There was always a whiff of political intrigue about him, a sense that he counted somehow in the future of Russia, and that he was waiting for his moment.

His wife was agreeable while the Prince was morose, open-hearted while he was suspicious, and she was given to laughter while he pouted in the corner. On the occasions when Henry saw the Prince, he and his wife arrived together, and left together, and it was understood that they lived together but that was all. The Princess's gestures, her casual approach, her lack of ceremony, the lightness of her social touch signalled an ease with custom. Her manner was, like that of everyone else in her world, designed. Had it not been so, she would not have been invited to those salons and gatherings.

'"It is time", the Prince has said, "for us all to go back to Russia, the homeland." He has become a reformer. He says that Russia will collapse if it does not reform. I told him that Russia collapsed a long time ago, but I did not remind him that he had very little interest in reform when he was not in debt. His first wife's family have brought up the child and they want nothing to do with him.'

'Where will you live?' he asked her.

'I will live in a crumbling mansion and half-crazed peasants will have their noses up against the glass of my windows, if there is glass still in the windows. That is where I will live.'

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'And Paris?'

'I have to give up everything, the house, the servants, my friends, my whole life. I will freeze to death or I will die of boredom. It will be a race between the two.'

'But why?' he asked gently.

'He says I have wasted all his money. I have sold the house and I have spent days burning letters and crying and throwing away clothes. And now I am saying goodbye to everyone. I am leaving London tomorrow and I am going to spend one month in Venice. Then I will travel to Russia. He says that others are returning too, but they are going to St Petersburg. That is not what he has chosen for me.'

She spoke with feeling, but as he watched her he sensed that he was listening to one of his actors enjoying her own performance. Sometimes she spoke as though she were telling an amusing anecdote about somebody else.

'I've seen everyone I know who's still alive and I've read over all the letters of those who are dead. With some people I've done both. I burned Paul Joukowsky's letters and then I saw him. I did not expect to see him. He is aging badly. I did not expect that either.'

She caught his eye for one second and it was as though a flash of clear summer light had come into the room. Paul Joukowsky was forty-six now, he calculated; they had not met for many years. No one had ever come like this and mentioned his name.

Henry was careful to try to speak immediately, ask a question, change the subject. Perhaps there was something in the letters, a stray sentence, or the account of a conversation or a meeting. But he did not think so. Perhaps his visitor was letting him know for nostalgia's sake what his aura had suggested in those years, his own designed self. His attempt to be earnest, hesitant and polite had not fooled women like her who watched his full mouth and the glance of his eyes and instantly understood it all. They said, of course, nothing, just as she was saying nothing now, merely a name, an old name that rang in his ears. A name that, once, had meant everything to him.

'But surely you will return?'

'That is the promise he has extracted from me. That I will not return, that I will stay in Russia.'

The tone was dramatic, and he suddenly saw her on the stage, moving casually, talking as though she put no thought into it, and then throwing an arrow, a single line intended to hit home. From what she had said, he understood for the first time what had happened. She must have done something very wrong to place herself back in his power. In her circle, there would be knowledge and speculation. Some would know, and those who did not know would be able to guess. Just as she let him guess now.

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These thoughts preoccupied him, and he found that he watched the Princess, carefully weighing up what she had been saying, while thinking how he could use this. He must write it down as soon as she left. He hoped to hear nothing more, none of the explicit details, but as she continued speaking, it was clear that she was frightened and his sympathy was once more aroused.

'You know, others have gone back and the reports are excellent. There is new life in St Petersburg, but as I told you that is not where I am going. And Daudet whom I met at a party said the most foolish thing to me. Perhaps he thought that it might console me. He told me that I would have my memories. But my memories are of no use to me. I told him that I never had any interest in memories. I love today and tomorrow, and if I am in form I also love the day after tomorrow. Last year is gone, who cares about last year?'

'Daudet does, I imagine.'

'Yes, too much.'

She stood up to go and he accompanied her to the front door. When he saw that she had left a cab waiting, he wondered who was paying for it.

'And Paul? Should I have given you some of the letters? Would you have wanted them?'

Henry put out his hand as though she had not asked the question. He moved his lips, about to say something, and then stopped. He held her hand for a moment. She was almost in tears as she walked towards the cab.

He had been living in these rooms in De Vere Gardens for twelve years but the name Paul had never once been uttered within the walls. His presence had been buried beneath the daily business of writing and remembering and imagining. Even in dreams, it was years since Paul had appeared.

The bare bones of the Princess's story would not need to be set down now. They would stay in his mind. He did not know how he would work it, whether it would be her last days in Paris - burning letters, giving things away, leaving things behind- or her last salon, or her interview with her husband, the moment when she first learned her fate.

He would remember her visit, but there was something else that he wanted to write down now. It was something he had written before and had been careful to destroy. It seemed strange, almost sad, to him that he had produced and published so much, rendered so much that was private, and yet the thing that he most needed to write, would never be seen or published, would never be known or understood by anyone.

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He took the pen and began. He could have written an indecipherable script, or used a shorthand that only he himself would understand. But he wrote clearly, whispering the words. He did not know why this had to be written, why the stirring of the memory was not enough. But the Princess's visit and her talk about banishment and memory, of things that were over and would not come back, and - he stopped writing now and sighed - her saying the name, saying it as though it were still vividly present somewhere within reach, all these things guided his tone as he wrote.

He set down on paper what had happened when he returned to Paris, having received a note from Paul, that summer more than a quarter of a century before. He had stood in the beautiful city on a small street in the dusk, gazing upwards, waiting, watching, for the lighting of a lamp in the window on the third storey. As the lamp blazed up and with tears in his eyes he had strained to see Paul Joukowsky's face at the window, his dark hair, the quickness of his eyes, the scowl that could so easily turn into a smile, the thin nose, the broad chin, the pale lips. As night fell, he knew that he himself on the unlit street could not be seen, and he knew also that he could not move, either to return to his own quarters or - he held his breath even at the thought - to attempt to gain access to Paul's rooms.

Paul’s note was unambiguous; it had made clear that he would be alone. No one came or went, and Paul’s face did not appear at the window. He wondered now if these hours were not the truest he had ever lived. The most accurate comparison he could find was with a smooth, hopeful, hushed sea journey, an interlude suspended between two dull countries, standing there as though floating, knowing that one step would be a step into the impossible, the vast unknown. He waited to catch a moment's further sight of what was there, the unapproachable face. And for hours he stood still, wet with rain, brushed at intervals by those passing by, and never from behind the lamp for one moment more was the face visible.

He wrote down the story of that night and thought then of the rest of the story which could never be written, no matter how secret the paper or how quickly it would be burned or destroyed. The rest of the story was imaginary, and it was something he would never allow himself to put into words. In it, he had crossed the road half-way through his vigil. He had alerted Paul to his presence and Paul had come down and they had walked up the stairs together in silence. And it was very clear now - Paul had made it clear - what would happen.

He found that his hands were shaking. He had never allowed himself to imagine beyond that point. It was the closest he had come, but he had not come close at all. He kept his vigil that night in the rain until the light in the window faded. He waited for a while longer to see if something else would happen, but the windows remained dark, they gave nothing away. Then he walked slowly home. He was on dry land again. His clothes were soaking, his shoes had been destroyed by the rain.

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He loved the dress rehearsals and allowed himself to picture the potential play-goers in each seat in the theatre. The lighting, the extravagant and opulent costumes, and the ringing voices filled him with pride and pleasure. He had never, in all the years, seen anyone purchase or read one of his books. And even if he had witnessed such a scene, he would not have known the effects of his sentences. Reading was as silent and solitary and private as writing. Now, he would hear people in the audience hold their breath, cry out, fall silent.

He placed friends, familiar faces, and then in all the seats near him and in the gallery above surrounding them, and this was the most risky and exciting prospect, he placed strangers. He imagined bright, intelligent eyes in a man's sensitive face, a thin upper lip, soft, fair skin, a large frame that was carried with ease. Tentatively, he placed this figure in the row behind him, close to the centre, a young woman beside him, her small, delicate hands joined, the tips of her fingers alomost touching her mouth. Alone in the theatre - the costume-makers were still backstage - he watched his imaginary, paying theatre-goers, as Alexander playing Guy Domville, appeared. It became clear what the core of the conflict on the stage would be. He kept an eye on the audience he had conjured behind him as the play proceeded, noting how the woman's face lit up at the gorgeousness of Mrs Edward Saker's costume, the elaborate elegance of a hundred years ago, noting then how serious and still the face of his thin-lipped supporter became when Guy Domville, despite his vast wealth and golden future, decided to renounce the world and devote himself to a life of contemplation and prayer in a monastery.

'Guy Domville' was still too long and he knew that there was disquiet among the actors about the discrepancies between Act One and Act Two. Alexander, his steadfast director, told him to pay no attention to them, they had merely been stirred up by Miss Vetch, who had no role to speak of in Act Two and barely re-appeared in Act Three. Nonetheless, he knew that in a novel it could not be risked: a character, once established, must remain in the narrative, unless the character were minor, or died before the story closed. What he would never have tried in a novel, he was trying in a play. He prayed that it would work.

He hated making the cuts, but he knew that he could not complain. At the beginning he had grumbled a great deal - indeed expressed a pained amazement - until he had made himself less than welcome in Alexander's offices. He knew that there was no point in claiming that if the play had needed cuts he would have made them before he finished it. Every day now he made excisions, and he thought it strange that after a few hours, he remained the only one who noticed the gaps, the missing moments.

During the rehearsals he had little to do. He was both thrilled and disturbed by the idea that only half the work was his, the other half belonged to the director, the actors and the scene-makers. Overseeing the work was the element of time and that was new to him. Over the proscenium arch there was an immense, invisible clock to whose ticking the playwright must attend, its hands moving inexorably on from eigt thirty, as precise as the audience's patience. In that busy period of two hours, if the two intervals were taken into account, he must present and solve the problem he had set himself, or be doomed.

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As the play came to seem more distant from him, and more real, as he watched the first rehearsals on stage, then the first dress rehearsals, he became sure that he had found his metier, that he had not begun too late to write for the theatre. He was ready now to change his life. He foresaw an end to long, solitary days; the grim satisfaction that fiction gave him would be replaced by a life in which he wrote for voices and movement and an immediacy that through all his life up to now he had believed he would never experience. This new world was now within his grasp. But as suddenly, especially in the morning, he would become certain that the opposite was the case, that he would fail, and he would have to return, willingly and unwillingly, to his true medium: the printed page. He had never known such days of strange shifts and excitements.

He felt only affection for the actors. There were times when he would have done anything he could for them. He arranged for hampers of food to be delivered backstage during the long days of rehearsal: cold chicken and beef, fresh salads, potatoes in mayonnaise, fresh bread and butter. He loved watching the actors eat, relishing those moments when they returned from their appointed roles to civilian life. He looked forward to years ahead when he would write new parts and observe them create the parts and play them every night until the run was over and they would fade back into the pale world outside.

He also felt that as a novelist he had fallen upon evil times, any indication of his being hugely wanted by any editor or publisher was declining. A new generation, writers he did not know and did not prize, had taken universal possession. The sense of being almost finished weighed him down; he had been producing little, and publication in periodicals, once so lucrative and useful, was becoming closed to him.

He wondered if the theatre could be not only a source of pleasure and amusement, but a lifeline, a way of beginning again now that the fruitful writing of fiction seemed to be fading. ‘Guy Domville’ his drama about the conflict between the material life and the life of pure contemplation, the vicissitudes of human love and a life dedicated to a higher happiness, was written to succeed, to match the public mood, and he awaited the opening night with a mixture of pure optimism - an absolute certainty that the play would hit home - and a deep anxiety, a sense that worldly glamour and universal praise would never be offered to him.

Everything depended on the opening night. He had imagined every detail, except what he himself would do. If he stood backstage, he would be in the way; in the auditorium he would be too agitated, too ready to allow every groan or sigh or fall of silence to disturb him or elate him unduly. He thought that he could hide himself in the Cap and Bells, the public house closest to the theatre, and Edmund Gosse, whom he trusted, could slip out at the end of the second act and let him know how it was going. But two days before the opening he decided the plan was absurd.

He would have to do something. There was no one he could have supper with because he had invited everyone he knew to the opening, and most of them had accepted. He could travel to a nearby city, he thought, view the sights and then return on an evening train in time for the applause. But nothing, he knew, could take his mind off his prospects. He wished that he was halfway through a book, with no

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need to finish until the spring when serialisation would begin. He wished he could work quietly in his study with the haunting grey morning light of the London winter filtered through the windows. He wished for solitude and for the comfort of knowing that his life depended not on the multitude but on remaining himself.

He determined, after much indecision and discussion with Gosse and Alexander, that he would go to the Haymarket to see the new play by Oscar Wilde. It was the only way, he felt, in which he would be coerced into quietness between eight thirty and ten forty-five. He could then make his way to St James's Theatre. Gosse and Alexander agreed with him that it was the best plan, the only plan. His mind would be elsewhere at least some of the time, and he could arrive at St James's Theatre at the enraptured moment when his play had ended or was close to ending.

This, he thought, as he prepared himself for the evening, is how the real world conducts itself, the world he had withdrawn from, the world he guessed at. This is how money is made, how reputations are established. It is done with risk and excitement, the stomach hollow, the heart beating too fast, the imagination fired with possibilities. How many days in his life would be like this? If this, the first play of his which he believed could make his fortune, should end triumphantly, the opening nights of the future should be softer and less inflamed. And yet he did not stop wishing, even as he waited for the cab, that he had embarked just now on a new story, that the blank pages were ripe and waiting for him, that the evening was empty and he had nothing to do but write. The will to withdraw was strong in him as he set out for the Haymarket. He would have given anything now to be three and a half hours into the future, to know the result, to bathe in the praise and the adulation, or to know the worst.

As the cab made its way to the theatre he felt a sudden, a strange, new, fierce desolation. It was too much, he thought, he was asking too much. He forced himself to think about the scenery, the golden lighting, the costumes, and the drama itself, and those who had accepted the invitations, and he felt only hope and excitement. He had chosen this and now he had it, he must not complain. He had shown Gosse the list of those who would fill the stalls and dress circle and Gosse had said that such a galaxy of aristocratic, literary and scientific celebrity would gather in St James's Theatre as had never before been seen in a London playhouse.

Above them would be - he hesitated and smiled, knowing that if he were writing now he would stop and see if he could find the right tone - above them would be - how should he say it? - the people who had paid money, the real audience whose support and applause would mean more than the support and applause of his friends. They were, he almost said it aloud, the people who do not read my books, that is how we will know them. The world, he smiled as the next phrase went through his mind, is full of them. They are never at a loss for kindred company. Tonight, he hoped, these people would be on his side.

Instantly, as soon as he set foot on the pavement outside the Haymarket, he became jealous of Oscar Wilde. There was a levity about those who were entering the theatre, they looked like people ready to enjoy themselves thoroughly. He had never in his life, he felt, looked like that himself, and he did not know how he was going to

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manage three hours among people who seemed so jolly, so giddy, so jaunty, so generally cheerful. No one he saw, not one single face, no couple nor group, looked to him like people who would enjoy 'Guy Domville'. These people were out for a happy conclusion. He winced now at the arguments with Alexander over the less than happy ending of 'Guy Domville'.

He wished he had demanded a seat at the end of a row. In his allotted place he was enclosed, and, as the curtain rose, and the audience began to laugh at lines which he thought crude and clumsy, he felt under siege. He did not laugh once; he thought not a moment was funny, but more importantly, he thought not a moment was true. Every line, every scene was acted out as though silliness were a higher manifestation of truth. No opportunity was missed in portraying witlessness as wit; the obvious and shallow and glib provoked the audience into hearty and hilarious laughter.

If 'An Ideal Husband' were feeble and vulgar, then he was clearly the only one who thought so, and when the first interval came, his longing to leave was profound. But the truth was that he had nowhere to go. His sole consolation was that this was not an opening night, there was no fashionable crowd, no one whom he recognised and no one who recognised him. Most consoling of all, there was so sign of Wilde himself, loud and large and Irish as he was, or of his entourage.

He wondered what he could have done with such a story. The writing, line by line, was a mockery of writing, an appeal for cheap laughs, cheap responses. The sense of a corrupt ruling class was shallow; the movement of the plot was wooden; the play was badly made. Once it was over, he thought, no one would remember it, and he would remember it only for the agony he felt, the pure, sheer tension about his own play going on just a short walk away. His drama was about renunciation, he thought, and these people had renounced nothing. At the end, as they called the actors back for further bows, he saw from their flushed and happy faces that they did not appear to have any immediate plans to amend their ways.

As he walked across St James's Square to learn his own fate, the complete success of what he had seen seemed to him to constitute a dreadful premonition of the shipwreck of "Guy Domville", and he stopped in the middle of the square, paralysed by the terror of this probability, afraid to go and learn more.

Later, over years, he would hear hints and snatches of what had occurred. He never discovered everything, but he knew this much: that the clash between the invited audience and those above them who had paid was as unbridgeable as the gap between himself and the audience at the Oscar Wilde play. The paying public, it seemed, had begun to shift and shuffle, cough and whisper, even before the first act was over. In the second act they laughed when Mrs Edward Saker appeared in her large and expansive period costume. And once they began to laugh, they began to enjoy being offensive. It was not long before the laughter turned to jeers.

He learned later, much later also, what happened when Alexander uttered his last lines: 'I'm the last, my lord, of the Domvilles.' Someone from the gallery had shouted: 'It's a damned good thing you are!' They hooted and roared and when the

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curtain came down they cat-called and yelled abuse as those in the stalls and dress circle applauded enthusiastically.

That night he entered the theatre by the stage door, meeting on arrival the stage manager, who assured him that all had gone well, his play was a success. Something about the way it was said made Henry want to enquire further, find out the scale and quality of the success, but just then the first applause came, and he listened, mistaking the cat-calls for roars of approval. He glimpsed Alexander, noted how stiff and serious he was as he came off the stage and waited for a moment before returning to take his bow. He moved closer to the side of the stage, certain that Alexander and the other actors were triumphant. The whistles and roars, he still believed, indicated special approval of one or two of the performers, Alexander surely among them.

He stood and listened, close enough to the wings for Alexander to see him as he walked off from taking his bow. Later, he was told that there were wild shouts of 'Author! Author!' from his friends in the audience, but they were not wild enough for him to hear. Alexander heard them, however, or so he later said, because on catching the author's eye he approached him, his face solemn, his expression fixed, and led him slowly and firmly by the hand on to the stage.

This was the crowd he had imagined over those long days of rehearsal. He had imagined them attentive and ready to be moved, he had imagined them still and sombre. He had not prepared himself for the chaos of noise and busy fluttering. He took it in for a moment, confused, and then he bowed. And when he lifted his head he realised what he was facing. In the pit and in the gallery, the members of the paying public were hissing and booing. He looked around and saw mockery and contempt. The invited audience remained seated, still applauding, but the applause was drowned out by the crescendo of loud, rude disapproval which came from the people who had never read his books.

The worst part was now, when he did not know what to do, when he could not control the expression on his own face, the look of panic he could not prevent. And now he could make out the faces of friends - Sargent, Gosse, Philip Burne-Jones - still gallantly applauding, futile against the yells of the mob. Nothing had prepared him for this. Slowly, he moved off the stage. He did not attend to Alexander's speech to calm the audience. He blamed Alexander for leading him on to the stage, he blamed the crowd for booing, but more than anyone he blamed himself for being here. There was no alternative now, he would have to leave by the stage door. He had dreamed so much of moments of triumph, mingling with the invited guests, pleased that so many old friends had come to witness his theatrical success. Now he would walk home and keep his head down like a man who has committed a crime and is in imminent danger of apprehension.

He waited in the shadows backstage so that he would not have to see the actors. Nor did he wish to leave just yet as he did not know whom he might see in the streets around the theatre. Neither he nor they would know what to say, so great and so public was his defeat. For his friends, this night would be entered into the annals of the unmentionable, pages in which he had so studiously avoided having his name

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appear. As time passed, however, he realised that he could not betray the performers now. He could not give into his own horrible urge to be alone in the darkness, to escape into the night and walk as though he had written nothing and was nobody. He would have to go to them and thank them; he would have to insist that the repast planned after the triumph of his play should go ahead. In the half light he stood preparing himself, steeling himself, ready to suppress whatever his own urges and needs might be. He made his hands into fists as he set out to smile and bow and imagine that the evening in all its glory had been due entirely to the talents of the actors in the great tradition of the London stage.

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